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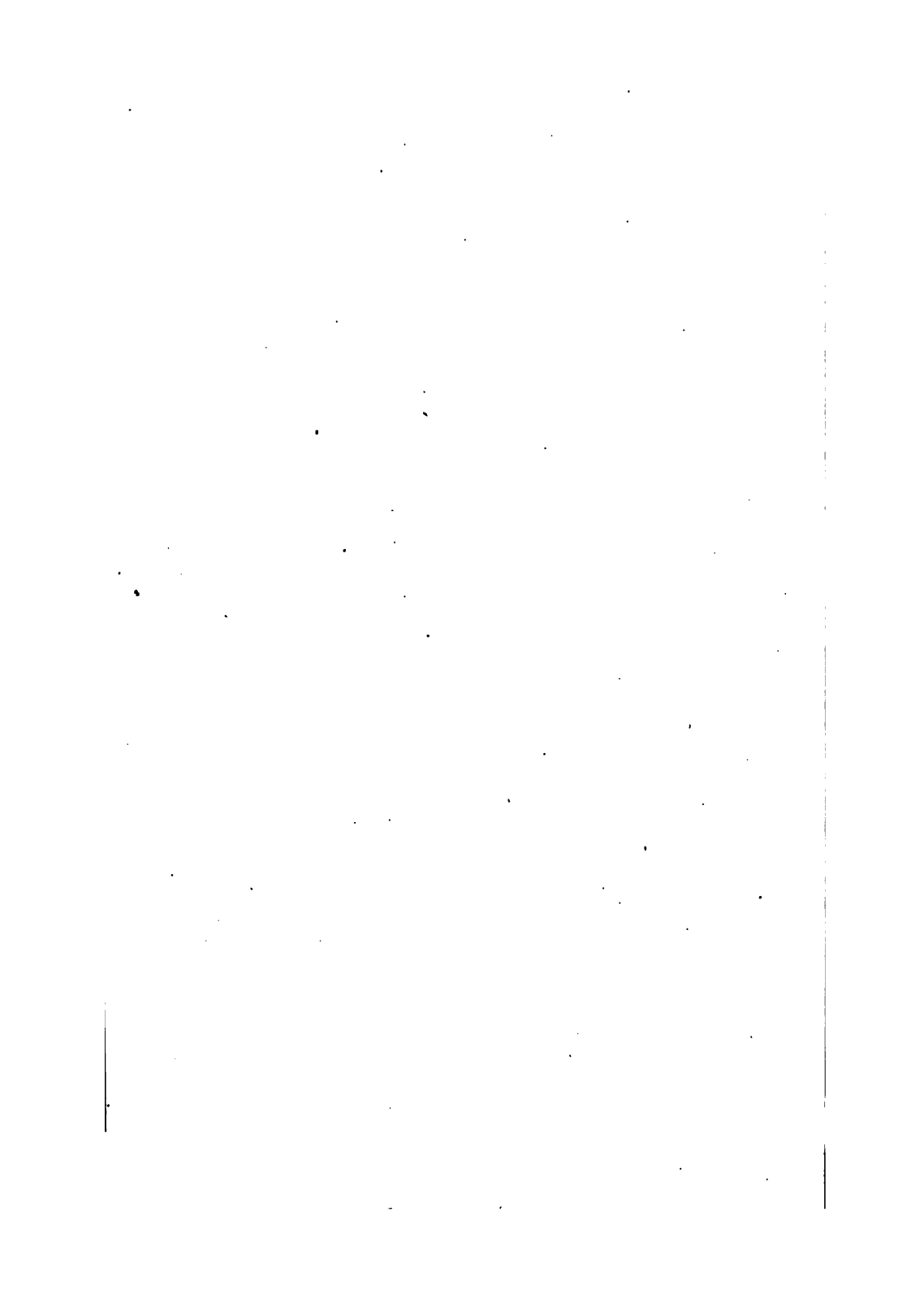
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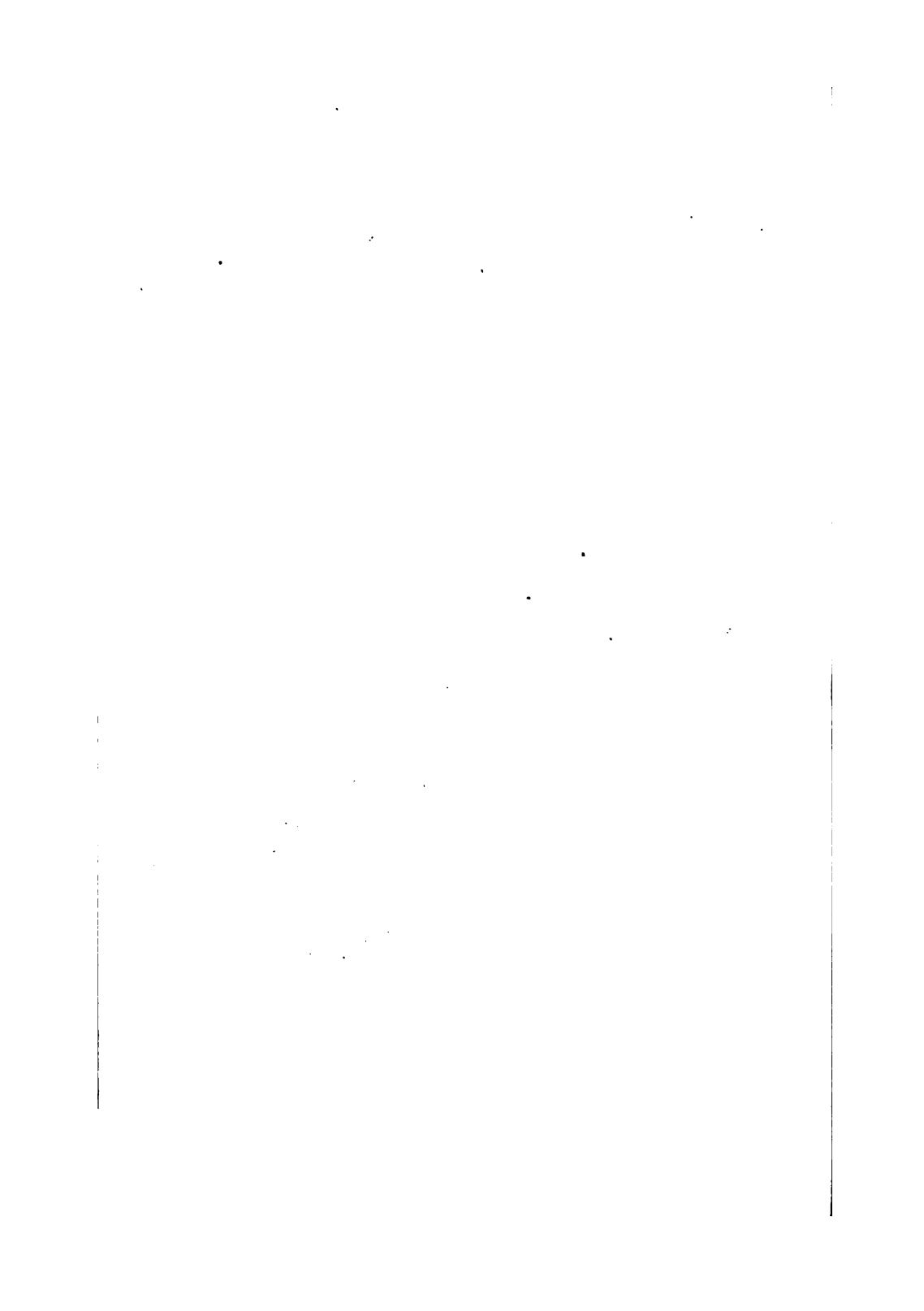






**SECOND-COUSIN SARAH.**

**VOL. I.**



# SECOND-COUSIN SARAH.

BY

F. W. ROBINSON,

AUTHOR OF

"GRANDMOTHER'S MONEY," "NO CHURCH,"

"LITTLE KATE KIRBY,"

&c. &c.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.



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TO

**CHARLES COLLAMBELL, Esq., J.P., M.B.C.S.E., &c.**

**IN GRATEFUL REMEMBRANCE**

**OF**

**MUCH KINDNESS AND SYMPATHY.**



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OF  
THE FIRST VOLUME.

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# BOOK I

REUBEN CULWICK.

VOL. I.

B



## SECOND-COUSIN SARAH.

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### CHAPTER I.

#### THE LAD WHO HELPED WITH THE LUGGAGE.

IT was wintry weather down in Worcestershire, though the May of the year in which our story opens was already two weeks old. It was a late Spring, the country-people said, meaning that the hail, and sleet, and rain, and bitter east winds were still in the ascendant, and that there was not a glimpse of sunshine from week's end to week's end. Times were hard and business was bad, and people croaked already about the danger to the harvest. It was a world that shivered by the fire still, and waited for a change. Weather-



wise folk looked up at the leaden sky every day, shook their heads, and said, "More wet;" and the wet came down as though they had asked for it, and washed out the energy from three-fourths of human-kind in Worcester.

It had been raining all day in the loyal city, just as it had rained the day before, and the day preceding that. It was raining at ten o'clock in the evening in as vigorous and lively a fashion as though it had just commenced, and the wind had turned out with extra strength to add to the dark night's discomfort. Worcester had lost heart, and given up and gone to bed, and at the railway-station, where by the tables one could ascertain that a train was behind time by three minutes, there was a faint semblance of life, more depressing than the elements. There was one fly, with its windows drawn up, its driver asleep in the interior of his vehicle, and its drabby horse coughing like a man. There was a wet old gentleman, glittering like a beetle in his water-proof as he walked up and down under the

dim gas-lamps of the station. There was a railway porter's head peering occasionally from a half-open door, and declining to allow its body to come forward until the glaring eyes of the engine were seen advancing through the miseries of the night; and there was a short, thin, haggard scrap of a youth, in tattered corduroys and a red comforter, curled up on a porter's truck, and sleeping placidly in one of the keenest draughts of which that excessively breezy station can boast.

The train that was over-due was not calculated to rouse the officials into energy, or bring the hotel vehicles from the city for the passengers, or entice able-bodied men and boys, in the hope of perquisites, from their homes; it came from a dull dead branch line, and was going on to Gloucester; it was not likely to land many travellers *en route* or take up many at that hour of the night. When it arrived at last, it came into the station noiselessly and in a spiritless condition, as though the steam were low and the engine-driver had just buried his wife; and only one bespotted window was

slowly lowered in a third-class carriage, as the train glided to the platform.

From this window an ungloved hand and arm protruded and unlatched the door, and then a stalwart man, of four or five and twenty years of age, a bright-faced, brown-bearded man, stepped out, dragged forth a portmanteau and a hat-box, stood aside to allow of the brisk entrance of the man in the shiny waterproof, and looked around him in that half-sharp, half-vague manner common to individuals who land themselves in places that are new to them, or have changed much since their last farewell. The guard banged the door to, the engine gave a melancholy wail and toiled on with its burden; the youth in corduroys sat up on the barrow and stared at the portmanteau and hat-box rather than at their owner; the fly-driver, who had roused himself, called out, "Carriage, sir?" and not receiving a response with that promptitude which he considered due to his position, cut the coughing horse viciously under the chin with his whip and drove off at full speed.

The traveller, after a hasty glance at the sky, called out in a sharp clear voice to the porter, who was slouching towards his room again,

“Here—I want you a moment.”

The porter, an uncivil specimen of his class, hesitated, looked over his shoulder, and grunted forth to the third-class passenger,

“There’s no more trains.”

“I don’t want any trains—I want you. Look alive, young man, if you please.”

The young man, who was fifty, and grey as a badger, seemed impressed by the traveller’s briskness, and flattered by the compliment paid to his youth, for he slouched slowly back and looked into the traveller’s face.

It was a face worth looking at—at least, some women would have thought so ; though it was not so much a handsome face as what might be termed a speaking countenance. It was sharply defined, with a pair of full grey laughing eyes, at variance or in contrast with a mouth and chin that were significant of their owner’s having a will of his own. It was a face of more than ordinary intelligence,

and an early outlook at the world had not scared or depressed it, unless appearances were against it and him.

"I expected a carriage for me to-night."

"What sort of carriage?"

"A private carriage, from Mr. Culwick's, of Sedge Hill. Do you know Mr. Culwick by sight, or his coachman?"

"There has been nothing here but cabs all day—and there's nothing likely to come now, I reckon."

"No, I reckon not."

The traveller looked at his portmanteau and hat-box.

"Where's the parcel-office?"

"That's shut."

"Can they be sent to the hotel?"

"Not to-night, I think."

"Do you want anybody to carry your luggage, sir?" asked a weak voice, and the lad who had been dozing away time on the barrow obtruded in an edgewise manner into the conversation. The traveller glanced at him and said,

"It is too heavy for you, my man."

"No, it isn't," said the youth, with alacrity.

"I'm very strong. I have been waiting for a job all night, sir—if you don't mind, sir—for I'm very strong, I am indeed."

The eagerness of the request, the reiteration of his powers, the contrast which his words presented to his white cheeks, and eager dark eyes, attracted anew the attention of the gentleman for whom no carriage had arrived, before the railway porter turned upon the applicant.

"You get out of this, young shaver; you've been here a sight too long already," cried the porter, "and I have had my hi on you these two hours. It's no use your hanging about as if——"

The boy cowered for an instant, and then turned quickly on the man.

"Don't lay a hand upon me—you had better not touch me!" he cried warmly; "I am talking to this gentleman, not to you. I am doing no one any harm—am I, sir?"

"Not that I see," answered the traveller, thus appealed to.

"And I am very strong, sir," he urged again.  
"May I try? I'll carry it easily; see, now!"

The portmanteau was raised and flung upon his shoulder, the other hand caught up the leather hat-box, and the white face looked round the burden inquiringly.

"Where to, sir?"

"To Muddleton's hotel—do you know Muddleton's?"

"All right, sir."

The youth strode into the wind and rain, and the traveller, after giving a tug to his cap, put his hands into the pockets of his coat, and followed his guide across and out of the station-yard.

Yes, it was raining hard in the good city of Worcester; the good city, in fact, seemed to have had more than a fair proportion of rain, judging by the choked-up gutters, and the sheets of water in the roadway full of turmoil and confusion, that went swirling into off-streets, with hissing, gurgling noises.

The youth turned the corner with the luggage, and the proprietor found him leaning

against the brick wall of a house when he had turned after him.

"Which way, sir?" he inquired.

"Which way!" echoed the stranger; "why, straight along there. Don't you know your way?"

"Can't say that I know much about hotels. I haven't been at this kind of work a great while, sir."

"How long?" inquired the traveller, somewhat curiously.

"Three hours and a half."

"Come, that's perseverance, if we take the weather into consideration. You are the lad to make your way in the world, in good time, though——"

"Though I haven't made much way yet," said the other, as he started off again with his burden, as if anxious to get beyond his companion's questioning. This was an impossible feat, however, handicapped as he was with a hat-box and a heavy portmanteau—such a heavy portmanteau that all the worldly goods of the owner must be stowed away inside, he thought,



unless the gentleman was in the iron trade, and travelling with samples.

There was no intention in the stranger's mind of allowing his fragile-looking porter to get very far ahead of him ; it was not politic, it was not safe, and—yes, he was a curious man in his way. One or two long strides took him to the youth's side again, and once more the sharp black eyes peered round the portmanteau in a half-nervous, half-observant fashion, as a dumb animal might have done at its master.

"I'm very strong, sir—don't touch the portmanteau, please, and I shall get on all right. Muddleton's is not very far now, I suppose," said the volunteer, breathing more quickly as he toiled onwards in the roadway, splashing through mire and puddle without regard to any selection of ground.

"Half a mile or so."

"Good gracious!" the lad ejaculated to himself. It was beyond his distance, and he should drop half-way on the journey, he was afraid, but he struggled on; and the traveller marching by his side, and with his head bent down to

keep the rain from his face, did not perceive that his attendant reeled a little in his progress.

"Three hours and a half," said he at last; "what have you been doing before this?"

"Nothing particular."

"Living on your means?"

"No."

"On your wits?"

The lad trudged on, and did not answer him. He wavered more in his gait, and splashed the legs of his companion with superfluous mud and water; and the man walked by his side, studying the roadway still, and unobservant of the failing efforts of the weak boy whom he had entrusted with a heavy task.

He was more interested in the youth's past state than in his present condition, and regarded him in the abstract.

"Who are you, boy?" he said, without looking up, and in the tone of a man half interested in his subject; "what have you come to this sleepy city for?"

"I—don't know," was the reply, and a more

sullen reply it was than usual, despite its jerkiness.

“Not for a living?”

“No.”

“To find a friend?”

“No.”

“Have you run away from home? Is that it?”

The man looked at the lad at this query—looked with a grave earnestness which betokened a keener interest in him than he had hitherto shown.

“If that’s it, we are in the same boat, boy,” said he. “I ran away from home ever so long ago.”

“Because——” said the lad, curious in his turn, and even stopping short for an instant for the answer.

“Because there was no place like home!—no place so confoundedly uncomfortable and unsympathetic and hard-cornered—and so I put on my hat and walked out. And yet, after all——” he paused and made a clutch at his portmanteau, which he suddenly thought was in

peril of slipping from the lad's shoulders—"Here, hold hard, youngster; what's the matter?"

"It's all right, let me be; I can carry it, I said I could," cried the boy with excitement, wrenching himself and luggage away from the touch of the elder man. This sudden effort seemed too much for the overtaxed strength of the porter; he reeled away towards the foot-path, and went on with weak and tottering legs for a few more moments, when he suddenly collapsed. It was an utter break-down at the very instant that the traveller had become aware of the position, and was striding forward to render assistance, and the result was chaos—the youth all of a heap on the kerb-stone, with the hat-box under him, and the portmanteau in the roadway like a big boulder in a mountain stream, with eddying currents surging round it and meeting on the other side.

It was a scene that surprised the traveller, and disturbed his equanimity; for something like bad language escaped him, as with the instinct of self-preservation—that glorious first

law of nature—he lifted his portmanteau from the road into a deep door-way, and then turned round to inspect his prostrate companion. When he was leaning over him, and peering into his face, the little anger that was in him hastily evaporated, and was replaced by a kindly sympathy more worthy of the man.

“You are ill—you are hurt?” he said.

“No; let me be, I shall get up in a minute.”

“Can’t you get up now?”

“I’m a little bit giddy still—the street swam round all of a sudden—but I will go on with the luggage presently.”

“Oh, no, you won’t,” said the man drily; “you should never have attempted it. I was a brute not to see—by Jove, the boy’s going to faint!”

He put his arms round him, and lifted him into the doorway, as he might have lifted an infant, and looked again at the white wan face under the cap, which was pulled tightly over the forehead in a hang-dog fashion.

“Poor little beggar!” he muttered, “why did I load him like this, and loaf along by his side

like a nigger-driver?—Here, what's your name! can't you open your eyes, just for a moment, till I——”

Here his anxiety took the form of action, for, still holding the boy's head on his shoulder, he kicked with energy at the door against which he was leaning, and awoke the whole house, which was supposed, at the first alarm of its inmates, to be in a sheet of flame from top to bottom.

A snuffy old woman, in an old black cap weighed down by grimy artificial flowers, was the first to wrench open the door; she had been sleeping by the fire, sitting up for a late husband, and she appeared with a bound on the doorstep, and nearly fell over the strange couple in her haste.

“Water—a glass of water, please!” cried the traveller. “This child has fainted.”

“What—who—water—whose child is it?” she called forth. Then she realised the urgency of the case, and ran back into the room, returning very quickly with a light in one hand and a glass of water in the other, at the same time as

heads peered down the narrow staircase, and some one opened a window above, and asked twenty questions in stentorian tones, without getting an answer to one of them.

"You can come into the house, if he ain't going to die, mind you," said the woman. "Has he been run over?"

"No—crushed, that's all. Give me the water."

The water was passed to the stranger, who held it to the lips of the fainting lad.

"Take off his cap, please," he said, "and then let him be. He will get the air that way."

The torn cap was twitched off, and then the woman, and the man who was supporting the lad, leaned forwards and stared with amazement at two small side-combs which were in the head, and which had been used for fixing and drawing up beneath the cap a profusion of raven hair.

"Mussy on us, it's a gal!" cried the old woman. "Why, what's her game?"

"Ay, what's her game?" said the man, very thoughtfully, as he echoed back the slangy question of his interlocutor.

The girl was still insensible, when some one in his shirt and trousers came shuffling downstairs with a cup in his hand.

"If gin's any good, she can take a sip of this."

"Have you any brandy?" asked the traveller.

"Oh! you're a blessed sight too partikler, guv'nor. No, we ain't got no brandy, no shampain, nor anythink."

"Sperits is sperits," said the old woman; "and if you're fool enough to waste it, Simkins, on a brazen chit like that, walking about in men's clothes in that undecent way, do so if you like."

"She don't look very brazen, does she, sir?" said the man, with a hoarse laugh, as the gentleman took the cup from his hand.

"No," was the answer, as a few drops of the spirit were given to the girl, who heaved a deep sigh, and put her thin hands to her head, as though she missed her cap already.

"She's coming round," he said.

"She's been shamming," said the old wo-



man, who had grown strangely uncharitable within the last few moments:

"She will do now if we can get her home," said the traveller. "Are you better? How do you feel?" he asked, kindly.

"I'm all right," was the slow answer; "I—I think so. What has been—the——"

She stood up slowly, with her hands pressed to her temples, glared from the traveller to the woman with the light, gave a faint little scream of surprise, snatched suddenly at the cap dangling from the fingers of the woman, and, with one wild spring forwards, passed from them into the rain and wind, and vanished in the darkness.

The traveller made one or two strides after her, and then stopped.

"Why should I follow her, and annoy her further?" he said, as he paused.

He remembered that he had given his strange porter no remuneration for services thus abruptly terminated, and started off again; but it was too late, and another memory coming to him, that he was leaving his luggage in the

street, he went back for it, and discovered that it was being taken into the house by the Samaritans, with a certain amount of undue haste.

“Thank you,” he said, politely. He shouldered his portmanteau, picked up his damaged hat-case, and marched off to Muddleton’s Hotel, where a waiter received him urbanely, but was puzzled at the quantity of mud which he brought in along with his luggage.

## CHAPTER II.

## ORDERS FOR THE MORNING.

SITTING in the coffee-room of Muddleton's Hotel, his slippered feet planted on the old-fashioned brass fender, and his grey eyes fixed upon the dancing flames of the big coal-fire, the man who had come to Worcester thought out the incidents of the day, and sketched forth a map of progress for the morrow. Warm and dry, and at his ease, the wan face of the masquerader of an hour ago came before him more often than he had bargained for, the girl being apart from his life, and only a stray incident in a career that had been eventful and varied.

He was a man of the world, and had seen

strange sights and met with strange chances and mischances, and yet he had not been at any time more perplexed than on this night of coming back to home. He was a man whom other folk's trouble disturbed apparently—hence not a selfish man highly developed. There was a stern story, he was sure, of much privation marking the life of that weak woman who had struggled into a man's dress, and hung about Worcester railway-station for man's work and man's wages; and he had experienced privation himself, and lived it down in some degree, not losing sympathy with it, or growing callous to it. He did not want the incident of that night to trouble him, but it would—why, he hardly knew, for poverty is common enough, and eccentric enough.

Perhaps it was on his conscience that the girl had toiled hard for a sixpence, and he had not rewarded her for her labour. Would she think that she was not to be paid on account of the non-fulfilment of the contract between them?—that the bargain had been struck, but not carried out?—that he was a man who expected every

scrap of his money's worth for his money, like— Ah! well, he would not mention names; perhaps even *he* had altered for the better with advancing years.

He rang the bell, and the waiter entered.

"If anybody should ask for me——"

"Yes, sir—what name, sir?"

"Reuben Culwick," he replied; "but he—she will not know my name. The party who helped me with my portmanteau from the station, I mean, and who left me in a hurry. She—he is aware that I am staying here for the night; therefore be good enough to ask him—her—the lad, I mean, or whoever comes," he added with a dash, "into the room to-night or to-morrow morning. Do you understand?" he inquired, as the waiter listened open-mouthed to these rambling instructions.

"Yes, sir—perfectly. Anybody who comes; man or woman. Yes, sir," he said with great briskness.

"Stop one moment," said Mr. Culwick, as the man flitted towards the door; "I shall want a trap to Sedge Hill to-morrow."

"At what time, sir?"

"Ten in the morning."

"To go and return?"

"And return?" he said inquiringly to himself. "Yes, and return! That is certain."

"Beg pardon, sir!" said the waiter interrogatively.

"To take me to Sedge Hill, and bring me back to Worcester, at ten in the morning," he repeated in a decisive tone; and the waiter having withdrawn, he lighted a cigar, and set himself to his coal-fire studies once more. The instructions which he had given had sufficed to turn the current of his ideas, and the adventure of the night passed away from his mind with the deeper thoughts that followed it.

"And return!" he said, and took his cigar from his mouth to laugh to himself more than once—and odd laughs they were, of various degrees of hilarity, from the hearty and unaffected, to the laugh with the inner ring in it, the under-current, as it were, of something which was scarcely irony, and which might have been interpreted into a lurking sorrow or re-

gret by any one who had known his history.

"Yes, Reuben," he said when, at a later hour, he was going up-stairs to his room, "to return!—positively the last appearance of Reuben Culwick at Sedge Hill. Will there be much of a crowd to see the gentleman under those interesting circumstances?"

He had made up his mind to solve the riddle quickly for himself, and at ten in the morning he was standing in front of Mr. Muddleton's Hotel, drawing on a pair of gloves, and critically inspecting the animal which the proprietor had harnessed to the dog-cart. There was a faint prospect of a dry day, if not a fine one; the clouds were not so low as usual, and the wind had changed during the night. Reuben Culwick looked up and down the street, and thought of his little adventure in Worcester last night. The waiter, not too busy, was standing at the door, interested in the temporary departure of the customer, and Reuben turned to him.

"Has anyone called this morning for me?"

"No, sir."

"If anyone should call about helping me

with the portmanteau last night, give—him—half-a-crown.”

“Half-a-crown, sir?” said the waiter; “yes, sir.”

“And ask her to call again,” added Reuben Culwick, as he sprang into the trap and drove off.

“Give *him* half-a-crown, and ask *her* to call again!” said the waiter, looking after him. “He doesn’t know what he’s saying! The old man at Sedge Hill will never make him out. A regular Culwick he is, and no mistake about it.”

And there was no mistake about it, that Reuben Culwick was still remembered at Muddleton’s Hotel.



## CHAPTER III.

THE HOME THAT THERE WAS NO PLACE LIKE.

WHETHER Sedge Hill should lie to the east or west, the north or south of Worcester city, matters not to the purport of our story; and it may not be politic to enter too minutely into the details of location. That it was a big stone house seven miles from Worcester, is sufficient to relate. It was called Sedge Hill from the rising ground on which it had been built, and from the wooded acclivity beyond it, where from the summit was a glorious view of miles of English landscape, with the cathedral towering above the house-roofs of the distant city, and the Severn winding like a band of

silver through a fair green country, well loved by art and poetry.

Sedge Hill—speaking solely of the mansion to which that title had been given—was a staring edifice of considerable proportions, with an aspect of newness about it that fourteen years had not done much to soften. It had been built to the order of the present proprietor, who had made much money by cotton stockings, and had risen from twenty shillings a week at the loom to the splendour of his present life. It was a new house, to suit the new man who had been lucky enough to get rich. There were spacious grounds beyond—even the larches on the hill were part and parcel of the domain ; and there was a big room at the side, that was new to Reuben Culwick since he had last stood in his father's house, and it was this that he pulled up his horse to inspect before turning into the carriage-drive.

“Improvements,” he said to himself; “even the house has grown since I was here.”

Then he went rapidly along the drive, drew up in front of the house, and stepped lightly

and briskly from the trap, giving the reins to a rosy-faced young man in livery, who emerged from some stabling in the rear, to be of service to the new-comer.

"Old Jones has gone, then?" he said to the servant.

"Yes, sir."

"Dead?"

"Oh! no, sir—he's with Squire Black, of Holston."

"And you reign in his stead? Well, we cannot all reign."

He knocked and rang, looking steadily through the glass doors the while. Another new face—a smart young housemaid, whom he had never seen before, to replace Mrs. Perkins, who was stout and sallow, came to the door and admitted him.

"Is Mr. Culwick in?"

"Yes, sir, but he's engaged just now."

"Will you be kind enough to give him my card?"

The maid-servant took the card and departed, and Reuben Culwick, like the merest stranger,

and feeling like a stranger, very doubtful of his reception, walked up and down the spacious hall with his hands behind him, and his hat in his hands.

Presently the servant reappeared.

"Will you step this way, if you please, sir?"

Reuben followed the servant along a corridor to a door at the extremity—the door of the new room, he was certain, from his old remembrance of the house. The door was opened, and his name announced, and he felt that he was passing into a spacious apartment, the walls of which were bright and rich with many pictures, and the ceiling panelled and massive, with ground glass in the panels, for the proper transfusion of light on Mr. Simon Culwick's "collection." When Simon Culwick had lost his son Reuben, he had taken to the "masters," ancient and modern, and given them all the love that was in his heart. It was not much, but they had had every scrap of it. In learning to love pictures he had forgotten how to love men.

But it was not at the paintings which

enriched the walls that Reuben Culwick gazed with curious earnestness, but at the big broad-faced man sitting before the fire in a capacious leathern chair, and who was looking curiously and steadily at him. There was a pretty, fair-haired young woman, in grey silk, reading at the table in the recess of a bay window, and Reuben was conscious of her presence—that was all. She rose not at his entrance, only looked towards him with a certain degree of interest as he advanced, and then turned to the pages of her book, or affected to do so, as he held his hand out to his father.

“So you have thought of me at last, have you?” was rolled out in a gruff bass, as a large, white, gouty-looking hand was placed in that of his son.

“So I have come back at last,” answered Reuben Culwick.

“You can sit down,” said the father.

“Thank you,” said the son.

This was the meeting after five years’ absence—the calm after the great storm which

had happened in that house five years ago. This was the home that the son had never liked, that he felt he did not like now, although he had come to it of his own free will. There was a pause, during which each man took stock of the other without any particular reserve. The father had not altered much—his whiskers were greyer, and the shadowing beneath the eyes was somewhat deeper, and that was all. There was the same sense of power, or obduracy, in the big broad chin, and the thin-closed, indrawn lips, and it was easy to guess from whom Reuben Culwick had inherited his decisive-looking mouth.

In the son there was a vast change, and the father noted it at once, being an observant man in his way. This was not the stripling who had walked out of his house, rather than obey his commands; who had replied angrily to his own anger; who had been as disobedient as he had been dictatorial and unyielding. This was a man of the world, with his will hardened by contact with the rough surfaces of which the world was full, and probably more difficult to

deal with than ever. Time had improved him, and made a man of him, and given him self-possession, and courage, and brains—and he had lacked all these when he had flown out of the house in his last passion. But he would be for ever lacking in obedience; the father, Simon Culwick, was assured of that already.

“I got your letter,” said the father, “and I might have sent the carriage for you, had it not rained so much.”

“The horses might have caught cold instead of me,” said the son, drily; “but I didn’t want the carriage. I was glad that I had not further to go last night than Worcester.”

He looked towards the lady in the bay-window at this juncture, and his father noticed the wandering gaze, and paid no attention to the hint which it conveyed.

“Well, what have you been doing? What,” —(after a pause, and with another steady and impassive stare at his son—“do you purpose doing now you are here?”

“Is it worth while entering into that question at once?”

"Why not?" was the rejoinder.

"It may give rise to discussion; and you and I never agreed together in debate, sir," said Reuben, half deferentially, and yet half satirically.

He had come back—long ago he had owned himself in a great degree in the wrong—he had wished to see his father again, and the reception had already chilled him, though it was no more, no less than he had expected from the first. He had not come for argument, to own more than his share of error—scarcely to own that a second time, having already explained in his letter almost as much as it was necessary to explain.

"I suppose, after all that has passed, you have no intention of sitting down in this house, and waiting complacently for my death, and my money?" the father inquired.

"You told me that I should never have a penny of your money, if you remember, sir," said the son, calmly.

"And you never will," was the blunt answer.

"I have never expected it after that day,



or after that oath," said Reuben Culwick.

"Why should you?" said Mr. Culwick, in a loud tone of voice, and yet without betraying any passion. "Have I been known in all my life to break my word? Has not sticking to my word, through thick and thin, in evil report and good report, made me what I am?"

"Yes."

"I would rather break my own heart than break my word. You know it," said the father boastfully.

"Fifty hearts as well as your own—yes, I know it," answered the other, with an unflinching gaze at his father; "and hence I come to you—not for assistance, I don't want it—not for affection, I don't expect it—but with the simple motive which I hope that my letter conveyed to you last week; to see you, to express sorrow for a long alienation, to feel glad that you are well, to tell you that I am not unhappy, and to go away again."

The son's tones seemed to impress the father, who subsided into his easy-chair, from which he had leaned forward, as if cowed by the cold,

clear-ringing tones of the voice which fell upon his ears; a voice which subdued him, and which touched him, though he never owned that—which made him even prouder of his son, though the time never came for him to own that either.

The young woman in the background leaned forward with clasped hands, until he caught her glance again, when she once more turned her eyes upon her book.

“Have you made your fortune?” asked the father, in a different voice.

“On the contrary, I have been somewhat unsuccessful.”

“How do you live?”

“I write—a little,” he added, modestly.

“And earn a little. I can guess the drudgery—don’t tell me any more about it.”

“It is a long story, that would scarcely interest you.”

“It would not interest me in the least.”

There was another long pause, during which the son, still at his ease, still singularly hard, despite his respectful manner, glanced round at

the pictures on the walls, admired them even secretly, but not enviously, wondered at their cost, and looked once more in the direction of the lady, whose pensive face and quiet grace he admired also, and at whose presence he wondered in a greater degree, though he repressed all exhibition of surprise.

Suddenly the father said, with that singular abruptness characteristic of the man :

“ You can stay here, if you like.”

“ For how long ? ” asked the son, surprised at last out of his assumption of composure.

“ Till we disagree again,” said the father, with a short, forced laugh ; “ that will not be many days, I suppose ? ”

“ One moment, sir,” said Reuben Culwick, with grave politeness, still studying his father, and experimentalising upon him with grave philosophy. “ A mistake parted us, and we are laying the foundation of another already, unless I explain the first.”

“ Go on.”

“ I may speak before this lady ? ”

“ Yes.”

"I was hardly twenty-one—a rash and foolish young fellow—when you wanted me to marry your friend's daughter."

"You would have been rich—you would have been respected—it would have been for the best."

"No, I think not."

"I say, 'Yes.'"

"I refused to entertain the proposal, if you remember."

"Remember! remember it!" cried the father, turning pale with anger; "do you rake this up again to insult me?"

"No, to enlighten you," said the other; "at that period, Mr. Culwick, I had promised my mother that I would not marry the lady."

## CHAPTER IV.

## UNSUCCESSFUL.

THE effect of Reuben Culwick's announcement upon his father was remarkable. The big man rose from his chair with his two large hands clenched, and his face of a deep purplish hue, and glared at his son in speechless wrath. For an instant it appeared as if he were contemplating a rush at this disobedient offspring, as in days past, being a man fierce and uncontrollable, he had done, to the boy's alarm, and the dismay of a poor fragile woman long set apart from him ; but the son sat calmly in the chair, which had been placed a few paces from his irascible parent, and regarded him imperturbably.

Simon Culwick sank slowly and heavily into

his seat again, and panted for awhile. The dark colouring left the face, but the bushy black brows retained their lower curves over the eyes, and the mouth was hard and fixed, until the lips parted slightly to allow a few words to escape.

"And this is the first time you tell me that you were in league with your mother?"

"Yes," answered Reuben politely. "I was a wilful lad who had not been brought up well, or looked after carefully, and I had been only taught to fear you. My mother, who had been separated from you for some years, I was learning to respect then. When we quarrelled, I went to take care of her as well as I could. I was with her when she died."

"You know how I hated your play-acting mother—how she hated me."

"Yes."

"Why do you tell me that you sided with her, when it would be so much the better policy to keep this to yourself?" said the father bitterly.

"Because I am not afraid of you any longer

—because I see now where you were wrong, and where she——”

“That’ll do,” interrupted the father; “what was the objection to the lady?”

“She did not like her,” said the son; “she distrusted her.”

“Very likely,” was the reply; “she distrusted everybody. Perhaps it is well you didn’t marry. You might have had a son to grow up and be a blight upon you,” said Simon Culwick bitterly.

“Heaven forbid that any blight should come from that direction!”

“And you expect me to forgive this deceit, as old men do at the end of a play?”

“Or towards the end of their lives,” added Reuben.

“Don’t talk to me of the end of my life,” he cried; “I dare say you have thought enough of it—have considered it would be as well to sink your cursed pride and your cursed temper, and come here in prodigal-son fashion. But it won’t do; I’m not a man to be hoodwinked in that way.”

"Yes, I have thought of the end of your life," answered Reuben Culwick moodily.

"It was an infernal liberty," said the father ;  
"I shall live as long as you."

"And it seemed hard," the son continued, "to die in enmity with each other. We were both in the wrong—both obstinate men ; and I should have been glad to make peace."

"And make money."

"That I can do for myself," was the reply.

"It's lucky you can, for I shall never make any for you," said Simon Culwick shortly. "Had you come here penitent—had you not preferred your mother to me, and your mother's advice to mine, I might have given you another chance ; but I have not made up my mind to do that, understand me, for I doubt you still."

"Nevertheless, I am not sorry to have seen you, father," said Reuben, rising ; "I came out of my way—a long way out of it—to reach Worcester. I am glad to find you well. Good day."

He extended his hand again, but this time his father refused to take it.



"You have come out of your way to give me a fresh wound—that's all," said the father sullenly, "and you have done it effectually. I don't want you to trouble me again. Should I at any time want you, I'll send for you."

He had intended this for merciless irony; but Reuben Culwick took a card from his pocket and laid it on the mantelpiece.

"A line will always find me at this address," he said, "and I shall be always glad to hear from you."

"I dare say you will," muttered the father.

"Otherwise," he added, and his mouth assumed the firm expression of his father's, "we shall never meet. I shall not come here again in all my life."

"You will not come here again at my invitation," said the father, as decisively as the son; "I can't forgive you—why should I? I never forgave anybody. I never forgave your mother. Your two aunts offended me years ago, you know. Have I ever forgiven them? One died last Summer, and I wouldn't go to see her—wouldn't go near her—and the other one is in St. Oswald's

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Almshouses, blind as a bat, and living on eight shillings a week. Eight shillings a week, and those pictures there cost me eighty thousand pounds."

"A good investment," said Reuben Culwick coolly, and critically looking round the walls; "they will increase in value year by year, sir."

As he looked round, he became aware for the first time that the lady in the bay window had disappeared. She had passed from the room silently, through a second door at the extremity of the picture-gallery.

"And I never gave her a penny in my life," added Mr. Culwick, senior.

"Poor old Sarah—blind is she? and in the almshouses too! I am sorry."

"What the devil have you to be sorry about?"

"I liked old Sarah," said Reuben; "she was one of the few friends I had when I was a boy, and when you were not rich."

"No," answered Simon Culwick, half to himself.

"But I am detaining you," said Reuben;

"and I am pledged to reach London to-night. Good-bye again."

He did not offer his hand to his father a second time, and the father only murmured a few indistinct words by way of farewell salutation.

When he had reached the door, Simon Culwick called out his name, and Reuben paused and turned.

"I am not deceitful," said the father, "and I may as well tell you that I have made my will, and that you will never be a penny the better for it. It is all left—all," he added, "away from an undutiful son."

"You threatened me with disinheritance years ago, and," said Reuben, perhaps a little acridly, "you are a man of your word."

"Else I should not be the man I am."

"Possibly not."

There was a moment's pause, and then Reuben Culwick quitted his father's presence, and closed the door after him. He went from the room into the corridor with so thoughtful a mien that he was not for the moment aware

that the young lady in grey silk whom he had seen in the bay window was waiting for him in the distance. When he saw her, she put her finger to her lips, and he repressed an exclamation of surprise.

"Go back," she said, with an excitement that astonished him; "don't give up—don't leave him like that—it's your last chance."

"You have been waiting here to tell me this?" said Reuben, coldly.

"Yes," was the reply; "for you have not said a word to please him, and much to offend. Why did you come, if in no better spirit?"

"I came to be friends with him."

"And you have failed."

"Hardly. He understands that I bear him no ill-will—my own father, madam!—for years of much privation and neglect."

"Go back to him. Tell him how sorry you are for everything—do something before you go that will leave behind a better impression," she urged again.

"No; I can't go back."

"You are as hard as he is," she cried; "as if it matters what you say to him—as if it were not worth a struggle to regain your position here!"

"I should struggle in vain—I—but may I ask why a young lady whom I see for the first time, and whose position in this happy house is a mystery to me, should take so great an interest in my welfare?"

"I don't take any interest in you," was the sharp reply; "but I know you are poor, and proud, and foolish, and that your father is not as heartless as you fancy."

"And who are you?" said the wondering Renben.

"Only the housekeeper, sir," she said, quaintly; "keeping house for Simon Culwick—and in your place. You should hate me as an usurper already," she added, mockingly, "if you had any spirit in you."

"The housekeeper—yes—but—" he said wonderingly, and without regarding her strange taunts, "I was not aware——"

"Why should you be aware of anything about

me, you who are as quarrelsome and strange as your father, and have kept away so long? There, go home, and think of the best way to bring that old man to his senses."

"And interfere with your chance," said Reuben, lightly. He was in better spirits already, and the odd manner of this young lady interested him.

"I have no chance," she answered, "or I should not be very anxious for you to get back. I should be too selfish—I should try to keep you away, being as fond of money as your father is."

"I hardly believe this."

"Mr. Reuben Culwick can believe exactly what he pleases," said the young lady, making him a very low obeisance, which he felt bound to return with almost the same degree of mock solemnity; after which he would have continued the conversation, had she not darted along the corridor and disappeared.

"A queer young woman," muttered Reuben.

as he walked to the front door and let himself out of the house.

The horse and chaise, that he had hired of Muddleton's, were still in charge of the rosy-faced groom, whom he presented with a fee, and then drove away without looking once behind him. He had fulfilled his task—it had failed, as he had been sure all along that it would fail, knowing so much better than anyone else what his father was like, and how unlike—Heaven forgive him!—to all other fathers of whom he had heard men speak, and whom, in his pilgrimage, he had encountered. Ah! it was lucky that he had not turned out a worse man, considering his early training and his early neglect, the want of sympathy with him and his boyish pursuits and aspirations, the total absence of all affection, his own utter loneliness of youth, and the world left to tempt him, rather than afford him grave experience. Why had he not grown up an arrant scamp, a thorough blackguard, as some will, left to the blight of such neglect as his, and then faced suddenly with bitter tyranny and exaction?

What had saved him?—Heaven, his own strong will, or his play-acting mother, whose life he had shared at the last?

He drove into the city of Worcester with his face graver and more thoughtful than he had driven away from it that morning—although he had foreseen much of the result of his journey, and had prepared for it. The position was a strange one, stranger than our readers are aware of at present; and that fair-faced energetic young lady who had reproved him, rendered the world before him a serious subject for contemplation. He should remember coming to Worcester again to the last day of his life. It was a new beginning; even in the rain last night he had stepped from the common-place to a something like romance, but he had forgotten the first incident of his arrival until he was in Muddleton's coffee-room, and the waiter with his hands on the table was leaning across the white cloth towards him.

"Beg pardon, sir, but he's been."

"Who has been?" asked Reuben.



"The young man who helped to carry the luggage last night for you."

"Has she, by Jove?" said Reuben.

The waiter's eyes rounded and enlarged, but he had been bred in too polite a sphere to express any opinion, although that number forty-eight—which was the number of Reuben's room—should be so ignorant of the sex of the party who had assisted him last night was extraordinarily bewildering, unless drink had done for forty-eight before his arrival.

"Yessir. And *he* said," he added, with the slightest emphasis on the pronoun, "that he thought half-a-crown a precious little, considering how he had spoiled his things with your trunk. 'The infernal trunk,' he called it, along with other names."

"She said that!"

"*He* tried it on very hard for another shilling, but I told him that I had my orders from you direct, and could not afford to advance, and that it was like his impudence to come at all. I said that, sir," added the waiter, deferentially, "because he got awful saucy, and we had to

put him out of the house. His langwidge, sir, was bad."

"What kind of a man was he?" asked Reuben Culwick.

"A shortish young man, sir."

"Yes—and thin?"

"Like a lath."

"And very pale?"

"Yessir, and dirty."

"A womanish kind of face, with big eyes—black eyes?"

"Oh! no, sir—not a bit womanish. He was as full of pock-marks as a cribbage-board, and his eyes were particularly small, sir."

"Very good—or rather very bad," said Reuben Culwick; "I am half-a-crown the poorer, and the man has got the money instead of the woman."

"Indeed, sir—yessir," and the waiter departed.

Outside the door he tapped his forehead significantly, and jerked his thumb over his shoulder in the direction of the room he had quitted—this for the instruction or amusement

of another waiter coming downstairs with an empty soda-water bottle and glass on a tray.

"Mad as a March hare, Bob," he said, sententiously.

"Who?" said Bob.

"Forty-eight."

"That's young Culwick, ain't it?"

"Yes."

"Oh! he always was a rum un."

## CHAPTER V.

ST. OSWALD'S.

REUBEN CULWICK had an early dinner at Muddleton's, thereby dispensing with the luxury of a lunch. After dinner he spent some time poring over a time-table, and finally rang the bell.

"I shall want my luggage taken to the station this afternoon," he said to the waiter, who had doubted his sanity; "I wish to catch the 5.15 train for London."

"Yessir."

"And the bill, please, at once."

"Yessir."

After he had defrayed the expenses of his board and lodging at Muddleton's, he sat with

his hands in his pockets, considering many things of grave perplexity. The waiter left him; when business took him into the coffee-room again, number forty-eight was laughing to himself, just as lunatics of a cheerful frame of mind, or of no mind at all, are in the habit of doing.

"Why shouldn't I?" Reuben Culwick said to himself; "I shall not have another chance—she's one of the family—I may never see Worcester again."

He beckoned the waiter to him.

"The St. Oswald Almshouses are at the top of Foregate Street, are they not?"

"Yessir—in the Tithing."

"Ah! the Tithing. I have been so long away that I forget names and places—everything but injuries," he muttered. He turned to the waiter, impressed once more upon him the necessity of his luggage being at the railway station by 5.15 p.m., and strolled leisurely out of the hotel, after a "good day" to the man who had attended upon him. He did not go direct to the Tithing, but wandered round

the cathedral, and strolled to the bridge, over which he looked at the Severn, and where he hesitated strangely.

"What is the use? I shall only hear the recital of her grievances, real and imaginary, disturb her and myself, feel myself in the way, and leave her none the happier. What's the use of my going, after all? I am as helpless, poor, and blind as she is!"

He did not see the use of it in the sluggish waters that flowed on beneath the arch of the bridge, and at which he gazed so steadfastly—he had even turned away as from an unthankful task of which the river warned him, when a second impulse set him with his face from the railway station, and took him with rapid strides in the direction upon which he had first resolved. The church clocks were striking three when he paused at the gateway which opened upon the inner quadrangle of houses dedicated to St. Oswald—one of the few kings of whom good-wearing saints have been made—and looked through at the courtyard and the pavement chequered with shadow, and thought

what a silent and ghost-like place it was, lying apart from the turmoil of the town. The doors of some of the almshouses were open, and at one of them there was a faint sign of life, in the form of a young woman, poorly but neatly clad in a black and white striped cotton dress, who was sitting with her elbows planted on her knees, her hands supporting her temples, and her face bent close over a book which lay upon her lap. As Reuben advanced, he saw that the watcher on the threshold had tired of her volume, and closed her eyes in sleep.

It was a selfish necessity to arouse her, for there was no one about of whom to make inquiries, and time and train would not wait for Reuben Culwick. The young woman had plenty of opportunity for sleep, if she could begin at that early hour of the afternoon, thought Reuben, as he lightly touched her shoulder.

The sleeper moved uneasily, and then jerked her head back suddenly, and looked at this intruder upon the quiet sanctuary of St. Oswald.

"Can you tell me where——"

Reuben Culwick paused in his inquiry, for the white, pinched face, and the big, black eyes, were the face and eyes of the strange girl who had volunteered to carry his luggage last night, and collapsed by the way. He could not be mistaken; he had looked too anxiously at her as she lay in her swoon to be deceived, despite her feminine guise at this crisis, and the taller woman that she looked in it.

The big black eyes blinked like a cat's in the sun, and the lashes quivered in unison, but then he had awakened her from slumber, and there was no sign of recognition on her countenance. There was a certain amount of contraction of the eyebrows, that might have indicated a half-scowl at the traveller for waking her thus unceremoniously.

"Do you know me?" Reuben said, changing his tone and question.

"No," was the slow reply; "I've never seen you before."

"Not at Worcester station, at ten o'clock last night, when you helped me with a heavy



portmanteau, that I was selfish enough to let you carry for me?" he continued.

"I help you with a portmanteau!" said the girl, scoffingly—"at Worcester station! yes, that's very likely."

"It was you," said Reuben, sternly, as he continued to stare at her, and as the girl's cool denial of the fact began to aggravate him; "why do you tell me it was not?"

The young woman did not answer readily. She rose to her feet—a tall, angular girl, smitten sorely by poverty—and leaned against the doorpost, peering at her questioner with her brow still contracted.

"Why should I help you?" she said, at last; "can't you help yourself?"

"You fainted away—you were weak, and gave up. Why deny this?"

"I don't know what you are talking about," was the sullen answer; "who told you that you would find your friend in such a place as this, I should like to know?"

"Then you were not at Worcester station last night?" said Reuben, still persistently.

"No," was the response.

"This is a very nice young woman!" muttered Reuben Culwick; "if I could have lied as complacently as that to my father, I might be now on a fair way to re-instatement."

The girl was turning away, as if with the intention of passing into the house, when Reuben remembered the object of his quest.

"Will you tell me, please, in which of these small establishments resides Sarah Eastbell?"

The girl paused, and then swung herself rapidly round, and faced him.

"What next?" she cried, angrily—"and what's next after that?" she added. "I'm Sarah Eastbell, and if you have anything to say against me, say it. I'm not ashamed of my name—I never was; I never did anything wrong in my life. Now, then, what is it you want?"

"You are Sarah Eastbell!" said Reuben, with a new interest asserting itself; "then you are—no, you can't be," added our hero, exhibiting again that incoherence which had already bewildered the waiter at Muddleton's.

"Will you tell me what you want here?" asked Miss Eastbell, peremptorily.

"I want to see an older lady than yourself, of the same name, and residing, I believe, in one of these almshouses."

"Oh, indeed! What for?" was the cautious inquiry.

"Upon no particular business—a friendly call, that's all," said Reuben, lightly.

"My grandmother is not well enough to see company."

"She will see me," replied Reuben Culwick.

"She is not able to——"

The statement concerning Mrs. Eastbell's idiosyncrasies was destined never to be completed, for a short, sharp "Sarah!" in an excruciatingly high key, that was like the twang of a wire, and left a humming sound in Reuben's ears, came from an inner room on the left-hand side of the doorway.

"Coming!" said the tall girl, and she disappeared at once, and left Mr. Culwick on the threshold, half resolved to follow her. He did not do so, however; he lingered there politely,

whilst some mutterings and murmurings went on in the inner room, and he felt that he was the subject of discourse, and that Miss Eastbell was giving a very bad account of him, and prejudicing her grandmother against him. This young woman was a being to be wary of!

"I don't care what he is, or what he wants," he heard the shrill voice say again, "and so let him come in, Sally."

"But——"

"Ah, it's no good your 'butting' me, Sally, I will hear what he has to say. Perhaps he's brought a fortune with him."

"Very well." answered Sarah Eastbell the younger, and before Reuben was prepared for her re-appearance, she was standing in the doorway again.

"You can come in," said the girl, sullenly.

## CHAPTER VI.

## "SECOND-COUSIN SARAH."

SHE led the way to a small room, scrupulously clean, with a bed in the centre of the room, and an old woman in the centre of the bed. There was nothing to be seen of Mrs. Eastbell but her face, and a grim, yellow, parchment face it was, cut up by a hundred wrinkles, and brought strongly into relief by the white sheet drawn under her chin, and the great frilled cap in which her head was framed. The eyes were closed, though the pupils were moving restlessly beneath the lids, which were to be lifted never again in St. Oswald's.

"Well, sir," said the head above the sheets,

“will you please to state what business you have with old Sarah Eastbell, who has been past business for the last ten years?”

It was a crisp and not wholly shrill voice, now that it had dropped an octave or two. The visitor walked to the bedside, sat down in a rush-bottomed chair that was there, and looked hard at her.

“When I saw you last you were a bustling little woman, carrying your years well,” said Reuben Culwick, tenderly. “I am sorry to find an old friend brought down as low as this.”

The pupils beneath the sealed lids were motionless for an instant, and seemed listening in themselves to the man’s voice, after which they began to move to and fro with great rapidity.

“I think that I should know the voice. But it can’t be——”

“Can’t be whose voice?” he asked, as she paused.

“It can’t be Reuben’s, can it?” she asked, eagerly.

“Yes, it can.”

"Now to think of that, after these years, and here!" said Mrs. Eastbell. "That's kind of you, Reu—I'm very glad;" and the old lady fought hard with the sheets, and got a thin yellow hand above the bed-clothes, and extended it in the direction of her nephew, laughing in an odd chuckling way that portended future hysterics, if she were not careful. Reuben shook the hand in his, and the girl stood by the mantelpiece, watching the greeting furtively.

"What made you think of me?" said the old woman, after a moment's pause.

"I came to Worcester last night; I heard this morning for the first time that you were here."

"Who told you?"

"My father."

It was a face, despite its sightlessness, that expressed a great deal, Reuben Culwick thought, as the grey eyebrows arched themselves, and the mouth became rounded.

"You are friends, then? He has forgiven you?" she said.

"No."

"Ah! he will presently," said Mrs. Eastbell, with an easy confidence; "there are many good points about my brother Simon, and it is only a question of time. All things come round in time, Reu—even good luck. That's what I often tell our Sally."

Sally winced suddenly at this introduction of her name into the discourse, and Reuben looked across his prostrate relative towards the young attendant, who drew a pattern on the floor with the point of her boot, and did not return his glances.

"Some day Simon will walk in here—just as you have done—and say how sorry he is for all the past," said the old woman; "sometimes I lie awake fancying I can hear his footsteps coming across the paved yard towards me."

"You should not fancy that."

"Why not?" was the quick reply. "It does me good."

"I would not build upon his offering you any help," said Reuben Culwick.

"I don't want any help. Eight shillings a



week keeps more life in me than I know what to do with. I'm very happy, though it's an awful place for flies. Sally does a little work when she can get it, and is a dear kind nurse, who never tires of me. She'll read the Bible half the day to me, when I'm too ill to run about much—a good girl, Sally."

"I am very glad to hear it," answered Reuben.

He would not have dispelled the old woman's faith in her grand-daughter by a word—by any question hingeing on last night's mystery, or to-day's prevarication. This was a woman who had faith in everybody, and extracted happiness even from an almshouse in a shady corner of Worcester city.

"When I am gone, I should like somebody to get Sally a good place. You don't know anyone who wants an honest, hard-working, truthful girl?"

"Not at present," said Reuben, glancing across at Sarah Eastbell again, who was still tracing hieroglyphics on the floor. She looked up this time as he replied to her grandmother,

and shrugged her shoulders, either at the old woman's criticism, or at the wild idea of her being indebted to him for her future position in life.

"Will she be wholly alone in the world some day?" asked Reuben Culwick, inquisitively.

"She has not a friend—she will make plenty of course, but she has them to make."

"My cousin Mark was her father, then? Is he——"

"Yes, he's dead. So's his wife. They were a worthy couple, but they were very unlucky, and so better out of the world than in it," said the grandmother. "When they died last year, I offered Sally part of my home, and my sister tried to do something for Tom, but he went to sea."

"Tom is Sarah's brother, I suppose?"

"Yes."

"And at sea now?"

"And at sea now—doing well, thank his stars."

Reuben Culwick had his doubts of Thomas Eastbell. In his mind he had already asso-

ciated him with an uncivil young vagabond who had called for money at Muddleton's Hotel, and considered himself but ill-remunerated by half-a-crown for work at which he had never assisted.

"Oh! you hear from him occasionally?"

"Yes; and Sally reads me all his letters."

Reuben looked once more across at Sally Eastbell. She was staring at him eagerly until he met her gaze, when the dark eyes shifted to the floor again, and a deep red blush—a brick-dust kind of blush—burned itself slowly in her cheeks, and stayed there as long as he looked in her direction. He was glad that she could blush; he was surprised at her; he was curious enough to wish that he could fathom the little mystery about her, and arrive at the secret of her motives and the history of her life. She was decidedly a strange girl, living a strange existence in the house of her grandmother, and playing, as it seemed to him, a double part—unless he was really deceived, and this was not the girl who had met him in man's clothes last

night, but some one strangely and wonderfully like her!

He could not resist a question which rose to his lips, and which brought to Sarah Eastbell's countenance the old sullen expression that had struck him first that day.

"Does Sarah sleep here—live with you altogether?"

"Yes," answered the old woman; "it's very selfish of me to keep her to myself, but, please the Lord, it will not last a great while longer. She's young—she's industrious, and will be always able to get her living anywhere, and if you hear of anything that will suit her, you will bear her in mind, Reuben."

"I shall not forget her," said Reuben, drily.

"She shall come and tell you when I'm gone, if you let me know where you live," added Mrs. Eastbell, in a brisk, business-like manner; "it is as well to arrange these little matters."

"I live at Hope Lodge, Hope Street, Camberwell."

"That's right, Rue—always live in Hope, my lad."

It was a feeble joke, which nobody appreciated but this light-hearted old blind woman, and she appreciated it for the three of them, and lay chuckling over it until it nearly choked her.

"You haven't told me much about your life, and what you're doing, Reu; but you're not going away yet."

"I must leave in ten minutes," said Reuben, looking at his watch.

"What!—not stop and take a cup of tea with your old aunt?" cried Mrs. Eastbell.

"I must be in town to-night."

"You find something to do in town, then?"

"Oh, yes."

"And money for the doing of it?"

"Yes—heaps of money," he said, laughingly.

"If I ever get strong enough to come to London, Sally shall bring me to Hope Lodge."

This was another joke, to which her two listeners did not take readily. They were blind witticisms to match her malady.

"I am going now," said Reuben Culwick, stooping over her; "good-bye, aunt."

"Good-bye, lad—thank you for a visit which will cheer me up for days; and think of something for my Sally, if you can."

How strongly impressed that sullen girl by the fireplace was on the old woman's mind, he did not entirely comprehend until this last moment of their meeting.

"Grandmother!" said Sarah the younger, deprecatingly; but Mrs. Eastbell went on, the thin bony hand clinging to her nephew's tightly.

"She's everything to me, but I wouldn't mind parting with her at once—to-morrow, if you should hear of a decent place for her. Anybody can mind me—and I don't want to stop the way for her. She's clever at her needle—she reads well—she's quick at figures—in any tradesman's shop, now, she'd be very handy—and she's only seventeen. So young, Reu, to be alone in the world after I am gone!"

"Yes," said Reuben, "so young!"

So young, and so wilful and deceptive, he thought also, after he had parted with his aunt and said "Good day" to Sally Eastbell, and walked into the little square courtyard, where the rain had begun to patter briskly again, as though there had been no wet weather for weeks, and it was coming down in a hurry to make up for lost time.

He was looking at the leaden clouds which were deepening overhead, when Sarah Eastbell stole to his side and twitched his arm.

"You need not trouble yourself to think of anything for me," she said ungraciously; "you wouldn't have done so, I dare say; but it's as well to tell you, I don't want any help from you; and as for leaving her before she dies—well, I'd rather die myself, much!" she added, with a sudden passion exhibiting itself.

"You are attached to her?" said Reuben Culwick quickly.

"She's the only friend I ever had," was the girl's answer, as she relapsed into her old moodiness of manner.

"Your father and mother?"

"Don't speak of them," said the girl, shuddering; "oh! don't speak of them."

"Your brother Tom—who is getting on so famously?"

"Towards the gallows," cried the girl.

"What does it all mean?—why do you tell that poor old woman——"

"So many lies—because the lies come handiest," she said defiantly, "and I have been bred upon them, and they're natural to me. That's all."

"Will you tell me one truth before I go?" he said; "come now, Sarah Eastbell—Second-cousin Sarah—in whom I am interested." Reuben Culwick spoke with tenderness; he possessed a wondrously sympathetic voice, and the girl looked at him till the sullen expression of her face softened and died away.

"'Second-cousin Sarah!'" she quoted, and a faint smile flickered round her mouth for an instant. "Well, go on."

"You will answer straightforwardly?"

"You will not go back and tell her, and make



her miserable, then?" she said, as though by way of compromise:

"I will not."

"Go on, then—Second-cousin Reuben," she added, half scornfully, half lightly.

"You were the girl who helped me with my trunk last night?"

"Yes," was the quick response.

"And you thought I had come to tell your grandmother about it?"

"Yes."

"Why were you so anxious to earn money, and in so strange a fashion?"

"Oh!" said the girl, turning away, "you're too curious."

"Come," he said, snatching at her arm, "an honest confession, and then good-bye, Sarah Eastbell."

"I shan't tell you," she answered, struggling to get her arm away.

"Was it for yourself?"

"No."

"For Tom?"

"No."

"To make good something that Tom had taken from his grandmother?" said Reuben.

"Ah! you know!" cried Sarah Eastbell, wrenching herself from her second-cousin's clutch, and running with great swiftness into the house, the door of which she closed with a noise that shook the place and startled Mrs. Eastbell from dreamland.

"What's that?" said the grandmother—"thunder?"

"Yes, it looks like a storm outside," answered the girl.

"I should think it did, when it has nearly shaken me out of bed," said Mrs. Eastbell; "but I dare say it will clear the air, and kill some of these flies. I hope poor Reu will not get wet going to the station."

"Can't he take a cab?"

"I don't believe he can afford it, Sally. He's like you and me, girl, very poor and beastly proud."

"Is he? I should have thought that he had been a gentleman."

"Gentlemen don't live in Hope Street, Camberwell, I know," said Mrs. Eastbell.

"But they can afford to leave money for their poor relations, poked under the pillow of the bed," cried the grand-daughter, whose quick dark eyes had detected the corner of a bank-note peeping from the pillow on which Mrs. Eastbell's head was resting. "Why, this is the luck you and I have been talking about so long!"

"I didn't want his money," muttered the old woman; "I'm not so poor but what I pay my way. He's a very silly fellow—he always was."

"Indeed!"

"He never could keep money—he was always doing something or other that was foolish. How much is it, Sally?"

"It is a five-pound note."

"Put it in the tea-pot, girl," said the old woman; "it will come in handy presently. I can have a comfortable funeral now."

Sally Eastbell made a clattering noise with the lid of an old china tea-pot, which, with its

spout off, formed the central ornament of a high mantelpiece, but she did not deposit the note therein. It was not a safe receptacle for money —Tom knew of that!

## CHAPTER VII.

JOHN JENNINGS.

MRS. SARAH EASTBELL, of St. Oswald's, was correct in her judgment. Hope Street, Camberwell, was not a fashionable quarter of the great metropolis. It is sufficient to indicate that populous thoroughfare as one of the turnings debouching from the Camberwell New Road—a street without pretension, a cross between a London street and a thoroughfare a little way out of town, and familiar to clerks with no spare cash to expend on omnibus or train, as a short cut, providing one did not lose his way, to Walworth Road.

Certainly not fashionable, although the inhabitants had music with their meals—it being

a street much frequented by organ-men, who ground out Verdi in long lengths all day, and were rewarded by small donations from patrons who never failed them when work was plentiful. It was a street, also, wherein there was much dancing to the organ music, and where so many limp and smeary children came from in the long Summer evenings, which were made hideous by multifarious screechings, was matter for grave wonderment. It was a street of one-story private houses principally, which had broken out here and there into shops that had been erected over front-gardens by speculative landlords, and had not always been successful ventures, judging by the aspect of the tenants, or the goods they dealt in. It was a street that the tally-man and the broker's man, the civil young man behind the loan-office counter, and the uncivil old man from the County Court, knew better than any street in the parish, and where the rate-collectors had more trouble in getting in their accounts than in any other part of their weary and pertinacious rounds. It was an unequal street, too, and full

of class distinctions. There were three or four two-story-houses, with wider front gardens, and less rickety palings, towards Camberwell, just as there were some smaller and dirtier hovels as the street narrowed towards the busy thoroughfare of Walworth, where there were two courts sacred to hard-working but disputations Irish families, who brought their fire-irons into the streets on holidays and Sundays, and rapped each other's heads with them, when religious or political differences required force of argument. It was a street that boasted of one large red-brick house even, that in days gone by—possibly when there was only a bridle path from Lambeth to the pleasant little hamlet of Walworth—might have stood alone there, looking over miles of fields and hedgerows, ending with the Sydenham hills. Now it was dedicated to festivity and to Bankruptcy Court decrees, at alternate periods of the year. It had a garden of an acre, which bygone speculators had hemmed round with mouldy little arbours; it had also an orchestra, a dancing platform, and a grass-plat, where fireworks were let off

on gala nights, when the admission was sixpence, half of which amount might be taken out in drink. It was a place which the magistrates had striven to keep shut, and which had an ugly habit of evading magistrates, and of opening suddenly under mysterious licences, or without any particular licence worth alluding to. It copied, in a feeble and flabby way, the more respectable and pretentious gardens of the Royal Surrey or the extinct Vauxhall; but it was a bad place at the core, known to characters of all degrees of badness, and all degrees of foolishness, where silly servant-girls and vicious shopmen giggled and danced and promenaded, and were the most respectable of the community.

Three doors from this select place of entertainment was Hope Lodge, one of the two-storied houses already mentioned; and here at the time of our narrative resided Mr. Reuben Culwick, shorthand writer, occasional special reporter to the *Penny Trumpet*, and a gentleman with a small connexion amongst a certain class of tradesmen whose books were too many for



their calculating powers, and invariably became obscure in details towards Saturday.

Reuben Culwick occupied the first floor of Hope Lodge—and under the bell-handle in the right-hand door-post was a tiny brass plate with his name engraved thereon, and “First Floor” in small Roman capitals written underneath, otherwise it might have been impossible, without very ample instructions for the purposes of identification, to discover the residence of our hero; for the gentleman who rented Hope Lodge, and to whom Reuben paid the modest sum of three shillings and sixpence weekly, for the hire of apartments which the lodger had furnished after his own tastes, had not hidden his light under a bushel, and had extinguished Reuben’s claim to locality by extensive advertising over his house-front. The name of “Jennings,” in large white capitals on a crimson ground, was the sky-line of the edifice, and another board, with a “Jennings” of somewhat more moderate proportions, had been fastened between the windows of the first and second floors, whilst “Jennings, Pyrotechnic

Artist," in blue and yellow, by way of variety of colouring, was inscribed over a dingy shop-front, behind which were various firework-cases, soiled and fly-spotted and time-worn, and many of them hollow shams, despite the air of explosive business about their blue touch-paper caps. On the door also had been painted "Jennings, Firework-maker to the Court," and over the door was a plaster coat-of-arms, significant of the Royal patronage which the family legend asserted had been once vouchsafed to an extinct Jennings, who had been blown to atoms one Guy Fawkes season.

The present proprietor, who jested at ill-luck, at times, when questioned concerning this announcement, intimated with a chuckle that the Court alluded to was one of the narrow thoroughfares at the other end of the street, which was liberal with its patronage when November nights came round.

Mr. Jennings was always waiting for November, although he drove a little business in coloured fires for minor theatres at all times of the year, and had twice been pyrotechnist to

the "Royal Saxe-Gotha Gardens," next door but two, where he had been twice nearly ruined by the defalcations of impecunious lessees, whom he had trusted with all his heart and all his powder.

On that May night of Reuben Culwick's return to London, he was standing at his door smoking a long clay pipe, and waiting patiently for November, after his general rule. Trade was slack, and he had finished work, and taken to fresh air, which he preferred receiving in his shirt-sleeves, when the weather was not too inclement for its reception. It was past eleven o'clock, and a dark, dull night for Mr. Jennings's vigils ; but he clung pertinaciously to his door-post, like a man who thought November would slip by him in the dark, if he did not keep his eyes open. But on that particular evening he was not waiting for November so intently as for his lodger, Reuben Culwick, who had said that he should return that evening, and who was a man on whose word everybody might rely. Being a man to be trusted, Mr. Jennings, firework-maker, sat up for his lodger, for the

earliest glimpse of the "first-floor," whom he had missed exceedingly during the last fortnight. There were some ties of sympathy between landlord and tenant which accounted for this, and which will be more apparent presently; and hence Mr. Jennings held in high esteem Mr. Reuben Culwick, and the good feeling was reciprocated, despite Mr. Jennings possessing many faults, and being to all outward seeming scarcely a man to take to readily.

Standing on the threshold of his domicile, with the flickering light of the street-lamp on his face and figure, he seemed a lank and weedy man enough, a man whom much tobacco had enervated, perhaps, and kept from standing straight at that hour; for he leaned at an extraordinary angle against the door-post, as though he had a hinge in him, which had given way and disturbed his grace of outline. Still, it was repose and ease to Mr. Jennings, and he smoked placidly. He was very pale, one could see by the gas-light, a thin and much-lined, odd-looking young man of thirty, with dusty flaxen hair that wanted cutting, hanging straight as

candles on his head. The gentleman's name in full was John Jennings, but the sportive custom of Hope Street had bestowed upon him the title of "Three-fingered Jack," for the irrelevant reason that he had blown away the thumb from his left hand, after a family fate which had never left a Jennings sound and whole who had once taken to the sale of fireworks in Hope Street. The Jenningses, from the time of the grandfather of Royal patronage, had always striven to supply the general public with a good article for its money, and sometimes they overdid it in strength and quality. Hope Lodge, in three generations, had been thrice blown up and twice burned down—hence Reuben Culwick got his apartments at a reasonable price, people of nervous temperament objecting to lodge over the surplus stock, after having once ascertained that bits of the family had been occasionally picked up as far as Camberwell Green and Walworth Gate.

Suddenly John Jennings, firework-maker to the Court, was joined in his watch by a woman as thin as he was, and as pale, or else the gas

opposite was bad for the complexion. She put her hands suddenly, and possibly heavily, on his shoulder, for Mr. Jennings winced and doubled up still more under the pressure.

"I wish you wouldn't, Lucy," Mr. Jennings said remonstratively.

"Wish I would not what, John?" asked the new-comer on the scene.

"Take a person off his guard like that, and scare him."

"Have you grown a more nervous creature still, watching for what will never come again?" said the woman, with a strange asperity of tone.

"What will never come again?" repeated her brother in dismay. "Do you mean that Mr. Culwick will not come back, then?"

"Yes."

"Bless my soul, how long have you been thinking of that?" said Mr. Jennings; "you didn't say so before—you hadn't such a thought an hour ago. What makes you get so foolish an idea into your head?"

He laughed in an odd hysterical fashion, like

a woman, as his greater interest took him out of his languid position, and set him upright and staring at his sister.

"Well, I've been thinking it over—what he is, and what we are—and I'm sure that he will be glad to be rid of us altogether. He has only stopped here out of compliment all this while ; but you can't see that so well as I can," she added fretfully.

"I haven't tried to see it."

"You shut your eyes and trust to chance, John—you always did."

"I'll trust to Reuben Culwick," he said, leaning against the door-post again, and puffing slowly at his pipe ; "he said that if he didn't write he would be back here on the second Tuesday in May, and back he'll come like clock-work ; although, mind you——"

"Go on, John—what am I to mind ?" asked his sister gravely, as he paused.

"Although, mind you," he continued, "his coming back don't mean exactly that good luck to him which stopping away would, and I wish him good luck—always—anyhow. But then

we should have heard from him; isn't he as truthful as you are?"

"He may have missed a post," she answered, evasively—"have postponed telling us humble folk of the good fortune that has come to him. Good news will keep, you know."

"For a young woman who goes more regularly to Chapel than any one of my acquaintance, you are uncommonly uncharitable, Lucy," said Mr. Jennings, meekly, and without any intention of satirising the last speaker.

"It is not want of charity to speak the truth that is in one's mind," said his sister in self-defence.

"I am not quite sure of that," replied John Jennings; "there are some truths that jar a little. When you told me yesterday that I was a poor muddler, it hurt my feelings, though I didn't show it."

"And though you will muddle on to the end of your life, poor John," she said more kindly, even tenderly.

"Very likely—what am I to do?"

"Rouse yourself—read your Bible—pray,"



said the strange young woman, with an extraordinary energy asserting itself, which seemed to dismay her brother, who edged closer to the door-post, and looked away from her to another notice-board erected in his front garden, where "Go to Jennings for your Fireworks" was legibly inscribed.

There was a long pause after this, broken at last by Mr. Jennings saying—

"You don't want him back, then, Lucy?"

"Not if he will be happier away."

"Prosperous, you mean?"

"Yes," was the reply.

"You would like him to forget us?"

"If it would do him any good, or if he wishes it."

"Ah! yes. Well, if he has gone, you've worried our best friend away, for you always would interfere, and preach to him——"

"He isn't our best friend."

"Yes, I know what you're going to say," said her brother, feebly; "of course, but I'm not speaking of that. And Reuben—by George, here he is! Hurrah!"

And Mr. Jennings, forgetting his apathy, ran along his front garden, and went, bare-headed and in his shirt-sleeves, at full speed down Hope Street, leaving his sister in charge of the premises.

"That's like him," she said, in a pitying tone of voice. She took her place against the door-post, leaning there as wearily and listlessly as John Jennings had done, and looking in the direction which he had vanished. She was short-sighted, and could not see the meeting between the two men; but when she was sure that they were coming on together—when a hearty laugh from Reuben Culwick, and a little spasmodic and thin echo of it from her narrow-chested brother, disturbed the stillness of the street, she quietly and undemonstratively backed from her post of observation into the dark passage behind her, and postponed her greeting with the man who she had prophesied would not return to Hope Lodge.

## CHAPTER VIII.

## THE WELCOME BACK.

THE meeting between Reuben Culwick and John Jennings was indicative of a considerable amount of good feeling, even of friendship, between two men whose characters, habits, and pursuits were wholly dissimilar. They had been absent a fortnight from each other, but John Jennings seized both hands of our hero, and shook them very heartily.

"I thought you would come back, Mr. Reuben," he said, with a certain amount of deference in his address, despite his friendliness of greeting—"I really did."

"Did I not say that I should be here to-

night, unless I wrote to the contrary?" asked Reuben.

"Yes; but so many things happen, and——"

"And Lucy said I should not come back," said Reuben, shrewdly.

"Yes," confessed John Jennings.

"Ah! she knew better in her heart," said our hero, "only she does not look at life so cheerfully as she might do; but then she's not strong."

"No, she is not strong," said John Jennings, accepting the excuse which his lodger had put forward to account for his sister's distrust.

"Has she been well since I have been away?"

"Pretty well," responded John—"for her."

"And Tots—how's Tots?"

"Oh, she has been fretting after you in fine style."

"I have brought her a doll as big as you are."

And then the two men laughed, and it was the echo of this laugh which scared Lucy Jennings into the back-parlour—a poorly-

furnished, neatly-kept apartment—where she waited patiently for their arrival, with her thin hands crossed upon her lap.

By the light of the candle on the table, it was not difficult to perceive that Lucy Jennings had been a pretty woman once, before pain, and anxiety, and time—what three destroyers they are!—had taken the prettiness of youth out of her. She was not as old as her brother by two years, but she looked nearer eight-and-forty than eight-and-twenty at first glance. Only a careful study of her suggested to an observer that she was younger than her looks by almost a score of years.

Reuben Culwick and John Jennings came into the parlour together, and the latter, with a croak of triumph, exclaimed, “There, Lucy—who is right now?” as the former advanced to shake hands with her.

Lucy looked up into the face of the big-chested, healthful man, and smiled faintly in response to the cheery expression which she saw there.

“You have kept your word then, Mr.

Reuben," she said, placing her hand in his ; and a very cold hand, with not much life-blood in it, it was that lay in his brown palms.

"But you didn't think I should," he replied.

"No," was the fearless answer, as the thin lips closed together.

"Now what does she deserve, to face a man and a brother, and a first-floor lodger of long and honourable standing, with this odious greeting?" he said, turning to John Jennings.

"A good scolding, certainly," answered John to this appeal.

He had set aside his pipe, and was fumbling at the lock of a small cupboard by the fireplace as he replied.

"I think so," answered Reuben ; "I think it shows a want of human feeling, an absence of all Christian charity ; and Lucy Jennings is found guilty—sentenced—executed."

Reuben Culwick was in boisterous spirits, or he would have never committed the indiscretion of suddenly lifting up the prim Miss Jennings in his arms and kissing her. In all his life he

had never kissed her before—never dreamed of taking such a liberty with his landlord's sister—but his high spirits carried him away, and he lifted Lucy Jennings as high as the ceiling, before he kissed her lightly, and placed her, as he might have done a child, in her chair again, where she glared at him in amazement, with eyes distended, and her face not destitute of colour now.

"You—have been drinking!" she gasped forth indignantly, "or you would have never done that."

"She thinks everybody drinks," said John Jennings, pathetically, as he produced from his cupboard a half-filled bottle of Irish whiskey, and two glasses, which he placed with due care in the centre of the table.

"No, I haven't been drinking, Lucy," said Reuben, quietly; "but this is home, and I am glad to get back to it."

"Ah! I dare say you are," she added with irony.

Reuben Culwick was used to her moods, but it struck even him that she was different in her manner that night.

"Don't you believe me?" he asked, leaning forward and regarding her with greater intentness.

She looked down at the faded hearthrug at this direct appeal, and evaded his steady gaze towards her.

"If you say so again, I will believe it," she answered, after a moment's silence.

"I say that I am glad to get home—that this is home," he said, very firmly.

"I believe you, then," she answered, in a different tone; "but why are you glad to get back to this wretched place?"

"My mother died here; you and your brother were kind to her and me, when we could not help ourselves—when we were very poor, and had even got into your debt. You were our only friends—my first start in life, such as it was, began here, Lucy."

"It is unsuited for you now—and we are unsuited for you, too."

"How humble we are!" cried Reuben, "and I am as poor as a church-mouse still.

"You pretend to be."



"Sceptical still!" he cried; "John, what shall I do now?"

"Kiss her again," said John, as he struggled with a refractory cork, and twisted himself into hideous contortions in his efforts to extract it.

"No—I will not have any more of that foolery," said Miss Jennings, with intense acerbity pervading her plain speaking.

"I wouldn't if she objects," said John—"if she doesn't see the joke of it. I don't think anybody has ever kissed her except Tots. She's not used to that kind of thing—she really isn't."

John said all this in good faith, but his sister looked the sharpest of daggers at him, as well she might, perhaps. John Jennings was duller than his sister, by several degrees. If she had not been brighter than he, they would have both been in Camberwell workhouse long ago.

Nothing seemed to distress or disturb the equanimity of Reuben Culwick. He was glad to get back, or he was one of the artfullest hypocrites in the county of Surrey. He understood these two better than they understood

themselves, having taken the trouble to study and be interested in their eccentricities long before.

"Well, you have sat up and kept a fire burning for a man who was not expected—and John is coming out with his whiskey like a prince," said Reuben, "but you don't ask me how I have fared in the country, what adventures I have had, what work I have done, what luck I have encountered. Not a word, upon my soul!"

"Don't say that," said Lucy Jennings, with a frown.

"I beg pardon; I had forgotten," said Reuben, deferentially.

"When you are tired—and you must feel tired, after your long journey—you will find the supper laid in your own room," said Lucy.

"Thank you—and till then?"

"Till then we shall be glad to hear how you have got on in Worcester," she said, a womanly curiosity exhibiting itself at last; "we do not attempt to deny that we are interested in you—always interested in you—poor as we are."

"Yes, but don't begin about your poverty again, please—poverty may be a blessing in disguise, for what you and I and John know to the contrary," said Reuben; "the poorest and most afflicted woman was the happiest mortal whom I met in Worcester, and the richest and most prosperous man I found as miserable and mean as ever."

"Are you speaking of your father now?" asked Miss Jennings, anxiously.

"Yes—the gentleman whom you talked me into visiting, prodigal son fashion, but who didn't take me to his breast and weep over me, and order his fattest calf to be killed in my honour," cried Reuben, a little bitterly; "I was humble and contrite, but he was as hard as nails, and the whole experiment was a tremendous failure. Did I not say before I started that this would be the result?"

"Yes," said John, "you certainly said that. I am very sorry—I am awfully sorry—what a funny man he must be!"

"Extremely funny," said Reuben Culwick

drily, "you would die of laughing at his humour."

"Do you regret that you have offered to sink a bitter quarrel," inquired Lucy Jennings, "and make peace?"

"No."

"You are glad that you have been to Worcester, are you not, despite this miserable result?"

"Yes."

"Then the fault lies with him, as it did, before you went, with you. And, Mr. Reuben," she added very earnestly, "you are one sin the less, I think."

"Amen to that."

Lucy Jennings regarded him keenly, as if a suspicion that he was ridiculing her earnestness had suggested itself; but Reuben Culwick was grave enough. It was not always easy to guess when this strong, self-reliant man was in jest or earnest.

"And this mortal, suffering much, and yet so happy—who was she?" inquired Lucy.

"Ah! there's a lesson for you, Lucy," said John Jennings, as he mixed the whisky.

"Have I ever complained?" was the quick rejoinder.

"No—no, I don't say you have," answered her brother, who was sorry that he had spoken; "you're very patient—and nobody expects you to be jolly."

"What kind of woman was she?" asked the sister, turning to Reuben.

"Old and blind, and in an almshouse," said Reuben—"my father's eldest sister."

"She is provided for—her eyes are closed against the world's wickedness, and she is spared many trials," said Lucy, somewhat sullenly, as if jealous of one more afflicted than herself, as invalids are sometimes.

"I have done a deal of work in the last fortnight," said Reuben—"written my special articles on the Agricultural Exhibition for the *Trumpet*, earned an extra five pounds" (he did not add that he had tucked it under the pillow of Aunt Sarah's bed), "had my change of air and scene at somebody else's cost, hunted up no

end of relations, of whom I'll tell you presently, and am back again all the better for my new experience."

"Take some whiskey," said John Jennings, pushing the glass across to him.

"Thank you," said Reuben.

"And here's good luck to all of us, before the year's over," added Jennings, as he raised his glass in the hand which wanted a thumb to it; "your health, Mr. Reuben; Lucy, yours."

Reuben said, "Thank you;" Lucy Jennings watched her brother tilt down his potent liquid, but did not respond to his kind wishes by so much as a nod of gratitude. Her observation elicited a faint protest from her brother when he set down his glass.

"I wish you wouldn't stare at me quite so much," he said mildly; "you make me feel uncomfortable."

"You'll take to drinking some day, if you are not careful," said Lucy, in a tone of solemn warning.

"May I not drink a glass of grog when my friend comes home?" he inquired reproachfully.

"A glass does you harm, and costs money—and you have no money to spare."

"I shall have presently," he said, nodding his head sagaciously.—"Mr. Reuben, I have been keeping some good news back till you came home—for good news doesn't freshen up Lucy as it ought, I'm sorry to say."

"I don't remember to have had any good news in my life—except what is to be found there, and which you know so little about." She jerked her hand in the direction of a large old-fashioned Bible on a side-table, as she spoke.

"Ahem!—yes—no—but I wish you wouldn't, Lucy, come down upon me on week-nights with Sunday conversation—when Mr. Reuben's at home too," said her brother.

"Well, the good news, John?—and then 'to bed, to bed,'" said Reuben a little impatiently.

"The Royal Saxe-Gotha Gardens will open early next month, and I'm appointed pyrotechnist," John Jennings cried exultantly. "Fireworks every Monday and Saturday. I shall

make a clear hundred and fifty pounds, my boy, before the year's out."

"Oh! indeed," said Reuben Culwick, somewhat listlessly; "but didn't they let you in last time?"

"And the time before, too," added Miss Jennings.

"These are responsible people—first-rate lot, I hear," said Mr. Jennings, confidently.

"I am glad to hear it," said Reuben, "but you must let me see to the business contract between you this time. I'll draw you up a safe one, and save a lawyer's fee, John."

"Certainly, Mr. Reuben; when it's ready, I shall be only too happy, for you're a good business man, with a keen head for contracts, which were never quite in my line, were they, Lucy?"

"Never," said Lucy, agreeing with her brother for the first time that evening.

"Although I'm too old a bird to be taken in again, for all that," added John, as he reached his pipe from the mantelpiece, and refilled it. "Why, if they were to play me any tricks, I'd



open an opposition gardens round about somewhere, and ruin the lot of them. Hanged if I wouldn't!"

Lucy Jennings shrugged her shoulders, and Reuben's mouth twitched at the corners.

"I wouldn't be in a hurry to do that, even if there were any opposition 'gardens to be discovered, John," said Reuben, gravely; "it's a rash experiment, and wants energy and capital."

"He never had either," added Lucy; "and as for the Saxe-Gotha, I wish it was burnt down to-morrow."

"God bless me!" ejaculated Mr. Jennings, "you don't call that a charitable and Christian wish?"

"I wish it was burnt down to-morrow!" she repeated, fiercely. "It's an evil place—it's a—Oh, Elizabeth, you naughty girl!"

"What, Tots!" cried Reuben, holding out his arms, into which there ran, with pattering bare feet, a pretty, flaxen-haired child, three years old, whose long night-gown did not hinder her rush towards him in any great degree.

"Oh! me so glad you have come back, Reuben!" said the child, half laughing to begin with, and then wholly crying as a wind-up.

"She'll catch her death of cold!" cried Mr. Jennings. "Tots, how could you come down like this?—why ain't you asleep?"

"You said—you said," sobbed the child, "that he was coming home to-night."

"Well, here I am, young one; don't cry about it," murmured the big man, as his arms folded the child to his breast, and his handsome brown beard hid her face from view, and tickled her terribly, for she struggled into a sitting position away from it, and rubbed her face and eyes energetically.

"Elizabeth," said Lucy, severely, "this is very wrong! Didn't you promise to go to sleep?"

"I couldn't," answered Elizabeth.

"Come with me——" began her aunt again, when Tots let forth so tremendous a yell, that even Lucy, a woman not easily put down, succumbed at once.

"Let her be," said Reuben Culwick, gruffly, then there was a second pause, after which he whispered in the child's ear a few words that arrested her attention, and Tots sat up again.

"Where is it?" asked Tots.

"In my portmanteau, at the railway station—coming home to-morrow, if Tots will go to bed now."

"And as big as that?" said Tots, opening her arms to their fullest extent.

"Bigger."

"Me go to bed" said Tots, with alacrity; "but," she added, "'oo must carry me up-stairs."

"Of course I will. Good night, uncle Jennings—good night, aunt—we're off, both of us," cried Reuben Culwick, and he was out of the room and striding up-stairs with the child before there was time for Tots to change her mind in any way.

Brother and sister did not attempt to follow him; the brother sat and listened until the

trampling feet in the room above announced that Reuben had deposited his charge in her crib, and retired to his own apartments; the thin woman with the worn face turned towards the fire, fast dying out, and passed a hand across her eyes, as if by stealth.

"How fond he is of children!" said John Jennings; "I think big men always are, Lucy. There was Topping——"

"Don't bother me about Topping," said Lucy.

"Ahem—no," he said, with his feeble little cough prefacing his remarks again, "Not if you wish it, certainly. Still it's odd."

"What's odd?"

"That Reuben's coming back should have put you out in this way."

"I prayed he might never come again."

"Why, we couldn't afford——"

"The man deserved better fortune than he can find here," she cried, "and so I didn't want him back. Besides, we don't agree."

"Well," said John, gravely, "you and I

don't agree, for the matter of that, but still we're company for each other in our sulks."

"You never sulk as I do, when the evil in me gets the mastery," said his sister.

"Why, Lucy, though I say it, and though you're a bit hard at times, there isn't a better woman in Hope Street."

"I wonder if there's a worse," said the woman, very mournfully.

"You're not often like this—you're generally so patient and quiet."

"I try to be."

"Have you got anything on your mind?"

"Nothing that I should tell you."

"Will you have a drop of whiskey now?"

"No, I won't."

John Jennings considered a moment, then said, with an air of profound wisdom asserting itself:

"I'm sorry Reuben has seen you in this tantrum, because I have often fancied that, by-and-by, you and he would get to like each other. He is a man who wants something to

love—look at him and that child, for instance—and you're not a great deal too old, and he's not proud, and you're——”

He stopped as Lucy Jennings swung herself round, a perfect virago in her last and worst attack of passion. He had never seen Lucy show off in this way before. Had she been at the whiskey?

“John, you're a fool?” she screamed,—“you're the worst of fools to think like that—to talk like it. I marry him! He think of me! I tell you I hate you for saying this to-night!”

John Jennings gasped for his breath.

“My dear, I'm sorry if I have hurt your feelings. If you don't mind, I'll go to bed.”

She did not answer, and John Jennings, after passing his mutilated hand over his forehead in a bewildered manner, went to bed accordingly.

When she was sure that he was gone, the woman sank of a heap on the shabby hearth-rug, and buried her face in her arms, which she

leaned upon the chair. It was a bitter grief, in which strange words escaped her.

“Why has he come back? Why couldn’t he stop away for good?”

## CHAPTER IX.

## "TOTS."

LONG before Reuben Culwick had made up his mind to rise the next morning, tiny knuckles had rapped significantly and persistently at his bed-room door. Reuben did not answer, although he smiled in his half-sleep, and knew that Tots was astir, anxious to see him, to hear his voice, to know all about the big doll that he had told her last night was coming home with his luggage. At the fifth or sixth summons, and when a Dutch clock down-stairs was striking eight, Reuben Culwick condescended to inform the young lady on the other side of the door that he should be in his



room in ten minutes, and that he requested the favour of Tot's company to breakfast on that particular occasion; a piece of intelligence which took Tots with a tremendous plunge to the basement floor in search of Aunt Lucy, the only vestige of humankind to be discovered at that hour, John Jennings taking it easily till nine as a rule.

"Me to breffast with Uncle Roo," announced Tots, with as grave an air of importance as her excitement would allow.

"Who says so?" asked Lucy Jennings, suspicious of the truth of the statement.

"Uncle Roo says so."

"You've been bothering him—you've been knocking at his door, Elizabeth, after all I told you," cried Lucy Jennings, sharply.

"Ony once or so," said the child; "he's ditting up fast, auntie."

Lucy Jennings indulged in a little lecture on the heinousness of the offence which Tots had committed, and then carried up-stairs, and into the first-floor front, a high-backed infant's chair, into which Tots insisted upon being securely

screwed immediately, and set close to the side of the chair which awaited the presence of its master. Lucy Jennings was still screwing when Reuben Culwick entered the room, and bade her good morning.

"You're spoiling the child, you are letting her have her own way in everything ; you don't know how to manage children," remarked Miss Jennings.

"No, I suppose I don't," said Reuben, "but the child knows how to manage me, and that comes to the same thing,"

"That's a poor answer," murmured Lucy.

"Befitting a poor sort of fellow. And this is a poor little waif, to whom much happiness is never likely to come—eh, Lucy?"

"I don't know—I can't tell," answered Lucy.

"When she gets older and more curious, when the world's before her, and we can't help her in it much. Poor Tots!"

The big man sat down by the child's side, put his arm round her, and kissed her, and two little arms were flung impetuously round his neck, where they clung and clasped him.

"Oh, Tots is glad 'oo've come back, uncle!" she said, with a sigh of pleasure, as she released her hold at last.

"Really?"

"Really and tooney."

"And what would you have done if I hadn't come back, Tots?" he inquired, "if I had stopped at my dear papa's for ever and ever, as I warned you that I might?"

"I would have come after 'oo."

"No, you would have gone to school with lots of pretty little girls, and grown up good instead."

"I would have cried till 'oo come back to me."

"That wouldn't have been right, old lady," he said, patting the child's back.

Lucy Jennings regarded the pair critically, allowed her gaze to wander to the breakfast-table, in order to see that all was as the lodger required, and then passed stiffly and angularly from the room—a woman who hardly understood the poetry of the situation upon which she closed the door.

And yet there was some poetry, possibly some sublimity, in the strong affection which bound man and child together. Ties of kindred there were none between them, any more than there were between Tots and the Jenningses downstairs. Tots was of the streets, and the warm heart of the stranger had plucked her from their desolateness some eighteen months since. He who could hardly afford to keep himself, made a great struggle and a little sacrifice to keep her—to stand between her and the workhouse, where the red hand of the policeman would have conducted her on the night Tots first appeared upon the stage of Reuben Culwick's life.

Tots, a ragged, unkempt, fair-haired, blue-eyed child, had been found on the steps of the "Prince Regent" public-house after twelve o'clock had struck, and the drinkers had been turned into the roadway. No one knew anything about her, and she knew very little concerning herself. She said something about mother and father in an inarticulate fashion common to her eighteen months of existence, and

she cried for mother for five minutes after the policeman had shaken her from sleep in the shadow of the public-house doorway, and a few loiterers had gathered round, and gazed vacantly at her, and failed to recognise her as anyone's child with whom they were acquainted. It was a commonplace incident of poor neighbourhoods, and such child-life as this—there was nothing to marvel at; children were often being lost, and taken to the station-house to be claimed, and to the workhouse when unclaimed. The only novelty about this affair was the interest of the man with the beard, the man who lodged at the firework shop, in the stray's forlorn condition. He had been striding to his home when the crowd arrested his attention, and when the child shrieked with fear at the policeman, as if her eighteen months had already taught her to dread the representative of law and order, he took her under his protection, and said that she should stay at the house in Hope Street, and be cared for till the morning. Tots clung to him as her friend already, and the policeman followed him to the next street, and booked the

full particulars in his note-book, in case of inquiries at the station-house, where Reuben Culwick had an idea that he would take the child the next day.

But no inquiries were ever made concerning Tots, though Reuben advertised, and the police-stations put up a bill on their black boards along with their "Found Dead's," "Burglaries," and "Murders;" and Tots was never passed over to the parish. When Tots was scrubbed and combed by Lucy Jennings, she was a bright specimen of babyhood enough, and in twenty-four hours she had forgotten father and mother, and taken so desperately to Reuben Culwick that the strong man never found it in his heart to set her from his charity again. It was a wild idea, the Jenningses thought—a foolish undertaking, to say the best of it—but they came to terms with the lodger for the extra trouble involved by the care of the child whilst he thought what was best to be done, until thinking over it became less of a habit, and love became a stronger element in Tot's favour, and pleaded for her till the day of which we speak.

For eighteen months had Reuben Culwick been the protector of Tots, and Tots had lived in a world of imaginary uncles and aunts, and there was never a talk of her going away now. Reuben had accepted an immense responsibility, and the weight of it had not oppressed him much. He had been a harder and sterner man before the child's affection for him had changed his character a little—hence Tots in her way had not been wholly an encumbrance to her preserver, but a blessing in disguise.

Sitting at the table and watching her that day, with his life far clearer before him than it had been, he thought Tots would be like a daughter to him if he lived—and if she lived. She was not a strong child, but he hoped that she would live to grow up and call him "father"—for had she been his own daughter, she could not have taken a greater hold on his heart. He should never marry—he should never be able to afford to marry anybody—but he would be able to take care of Tots until some respectable young fellow gave her a home and a name, and he was left alone to fight out the rest of his battle.

What that battle was to be like, Reuben Culwick was hardly certain. He was sure of a few scars; he did not look forward to any great degree of glory. He was not a despondent man, our readers have already perceived for themselves; but he was scarcely sanguine as to his future for all that, and he had no ambitious dreams of becoming a rich man. Once he had thought that he was cut out for an author, that publishers would be running after him, and the critical press singing to his praise and glory; but he was almost certain, not quite, that he had found his level on the *Penny Trumpet*, and that a few pounds a week would be the maximum sum which his abilities, such as they were, might be able to procure him.

As for his prospects, for his chance of becoming his father's heir, they had faded completely away now. He was pretty certain that he had given up every hope of that, that he and his hard father could not possibly agree any more, even before he had made up his mind to sink



his pride and independence, and seek Simon Culwick at Worcester.

After that meeting—which he had not conducted well, a strange young woman had taken the liberty of informing him—amen to all his day-dreams !

Tots and he were having breakfast together, and Tots was asking a hundred questions after her usual habit, when the first post brought him in a bulky packet and two letters. Lucy Jennings brought them upstairs, and lingered in the room glancing at the parcel and letters curiously.

Reuben had long ago discovered that his landlord's sister was an inquisitive woman—he was quite certain that she was a suspicious woman also, despite her chapel-going and district-visiting—and that spirit of contrariety which lurks in most manly bosoms induced him to say, "Thank you," and to place packet and letters unopened at his side.

Lucy made some little show of dusting the furniture with the corners of her apron, before she went reluctantly towards the door. Reuben

had not made a dash at his letters after his usual fashion, and imparted the general nature of the contents to those who were handy to receive it; and the attendant, half servant, half friend, said at last—

“You are not curious about your correspondents to-day.”

“I can guess all about them.”

“I daresay you can,” said Lucy, half disdainfully; “one’s from a woman at Worcester.”

“Ah—Worcester!” exclaimed Reuben, taken off his guard; “what’s wrong now?”

“You did not expect a letter quite so soon, then?”

“Not I. Now, Lucy, if this should be a recall!”

“What a change to your life, after this dreary street, and us dreary people!”

Reuben looked at her intently as he broke the envelope of his letter. She was out of sorts still; he had not remarked it so much before, but she was certainly a disagreeable kind of old young woman, and particularly plain and thin. Hers was a hard life, keeping

a house and a simple-minded brother in order, looking after a lodger and Tots, and not saving money after all her drudgery, but possibly getting into debt. A woman, too, to whom religion hardly brought the comfort or resignation that it should have done, and whom he would not attempt to tease, though he might object at times strongly to her manners. Poor old girl! what had she to make life bearable even? and why should he cross her tempers, and put her out for the day?

"She writes a good hand," said Reuben, regarding the envelope once more.

"Who?"

"The girl in grey silk."

"I don't know who the girl in grey silk is—I have never heard you speak of her before."

"No," said Reuben, "I suppose not. She was at my father's house yesterday morning, and I wondered who she was, and where the deuce she had dropped from. A pretty girl, too."

"Your father's second wife, perhaps."

"No—I don't think that. I'm sure not, for there was no wedding-ring, I recollect."

"You noticed her a great deal, it seems, Mr. Reuben."

"Yes, in my way. It's my habit to take stock of everything—how could I be a reporter, special and otherwise, without? And she——  
Hallò!"

"You are asked to return," exclaimed Lucy; "your father's heart has softened towards you, and Heaven wills a happier time for you, as I said it would."

"You are very kind—but this is from my Second-cousin Sarah."

"Who's she?" exclaimed Lucy Jennings, sharply enough now.

"Ah! you don't know yet," remarked our hero; "why, what a deal I have to tell you, and John, and Tots still!"

"So it seems," Lucy Jennings muttered to herself.

"You would like to know what this is about, perhaps, Lucy?" Reuben asked, somewhat drily.

"Not I—if it's a secret."

"I never had a secret in my life."

"And it's no business of mine—what's the use of telling me or John anything?" said Lucy, beginning to dust the books on a side-table near the door.

"Well, I'll tell Tots.—Tots," Reuben said, turning suddenly to the child half-buried in a large basin of sop, and hence very busy, very silent, and very much besmeared with bread and milk, "my Second-cousin Sarah sends me her grandmother's love, and the old lady's thanks for a fourpenny-bit which I gave her, and the old lady's hope that she may live to spend it, and the old lady's wish that I may hear soon, very soon, of a nice situation for my second-cousin, who adds in pencil, 'Don't take any notice of this,' in an independent way that's peculiar to her habits. What an odd fish that girl is!—she interests me."

"She is pretty, too, I suppose?" said Lucy, with a twanging voice.

"Ahem!—I don't know—I daresay she might be, if highly got up for the occasion. By-the-way, you might, with your extensive chapel connection, hear of something for Sarah."

"I can't hear of anything for myself," was the short answer.

"You!"

"I've tried more than once—when John has put me out with his absurdities—when I have despaired of him, or of ever doing him any good."

"But you hardly meant to leave him—that was a notion soon got over?"

"Well—yes—we'll say so, if you like."

"I should be glad to hear of something for this girl—she's a singular young woman, but one who might turn out well with a good soul to look after her. That poor old woman, Sarah the First," added Reuben, thoughtfully, "may pass away at any moment, and I should like to be ready with a home for her."

"Why?"

"Because without a home she'll drift, perhaps."

"From right, you mean?"

"Yes—it is possible."

"Is she so very weak, then?"

"Very weak. She can't carry a portmanteau properly."

Lucy Jennings regarded Reuben Culwick with amazement, but he had fallen into thought, or had grown tired of her want of sympathy, and passed into a jesting, aggravating vein, which she could brook least of all his moods. She went from the room, closed the door behind her, and then stood still. It was a habit of hers to pick up scraps of information thus—a bad habit, the result of insufficient training in her early youth, before her father blew himself to bits—and she knew that Reuben often talked strangely to Tots.

"There, she has not waited for the second letter—and that's very important to me, Tots."

Tots stared, and then dived into her sop again.

"This is a want of confidence letter, to balance the confidence expressed in Second-cousin Sarah's affectionate epistle. Tots, this tells me politely what a fool I am—what a vain and ambitious ass—what a drivelling idiot, to expect sensible folk to waste money upon a fellow who writes for the *Penny Trumpet*."

Tots looked up at the word "trumpet;" it suggested another gift when the luggage came home. But Reuben was deep in his letter.

"Yes, Tots," he said, more in soliloquy than to his little golden-haired companion, "Messrs. Press and Co.'s compliments, and regret that the novel which Mr. C. did them the favour, etc., etc., etc., is not suitable, etc., etc., etc., to their particular style of publication, etc., etc., etc., and with thanks for the favour of a perusal, etc., etc., etc., beg to return same, etc., etc., etc., and they are the ass's—the stupendous ass's!—most humble and obliged servants, Tots.—That's the third time of asking and refusing, Reuben," he said, suddenly apostrophising himself, "and you are uncommonly well-used to be snubbed, old boy; but still you bore the Worcester disappointment better than this one—eh? How's that—after all your experience—you duffer?"

There was a long silence, and when Lucy Jennings was tired of waiting outside the door, she went downstairs, and about her own business. Reuben Culwick, with the publisher's



letter in his hands, sat and stared at the breakfast-cup, and was not aroused from his reverie to an active concern in minor matters until Tots, spoon, and basin, and chair, suddenly tilted over, and the prostrate young lady required much soothing after her calamity. He did all the consolation himself; he did not send for "Aunt Lucy."

## CHAPTER X.

## A PLACE FOR SARAH.

REUBEN CULWICK settled down in his old groove the following day ; life went on with him steadily, and there was no shadow of discontent upon the path of his pursuing. His was an enviable nature, that made the best of things, that quickly adapted itself to circumstances, or sank all personal grievances beyond the ken of the watchful eyes about him. He was a philosopher who submitted complacently to the unalterable, or he was a hypocrite who disguised his bitterness of feeling with consummate ability, as Lucy Jennings considered. She could not believe in a man who should have

been rich, whose father was one of the wealthiest folk in the fat county of Worcestershire, settling down to a Camberwell back-street, and professing to be satisfied with his position. She was a well-meaning, thoughtful young woman, but she did not give Reuben Culwick credit for so much self-abnegation as that. She liked the man, but she disbelieved in his philosophy, and had grave doubts of his virtues; she had many grave doubts on most matters, and was suspicious concerning everybody's motives; and yet she was a religious woman in her way, and put herself out of that way to be of service at times. She was as hard to understand as most people, too, and she made no effort to place herself in a clearer light with those who set her down for an eminently disagreeable woman, which she was not exactly, though there were sour and sharp hours of which her brother and Tots were cognisant. Certainly she had not much faith in humanity, and Reuben's equable temperament aggravated her more than she could account for. What was it to her how Reuben Culwick took the ills

of life, or why should it distract her to hear him laughing pleasantly, when he should have been crushed down by much mortification of spirit? He had nothing to be thankful for, she sometimes thought, but his health and strength, and yet he professed to be happy—he who did not go to chapel, and kept out of the way when the pastor came to tea at Hope Lodge.

He was of an easy disposition apparently; his mother, who had died in that house, had said so constantly; and he had been always kind to his mother; but what a stubborn nature it must have been to hold aloof from the father so long; and what a proud man he must be, with all his forced humility, thought Lucy. No, she could not understand him—did not even give him credit for his unselfish devotion to Tots. He knew more about Tots, and where Tots came from, than most people, she fancied. She was not going to believe altogether in that story of Tots being found and adopted by him solely out of charity; she might as well believe in every line of that rubbishing novel which he had written for gain and for fame,

and which publishers were continually sending back with their respectful compliments, and they would much rather have nothing to do with it. He was a man with many good traits of character—she liked him, God knows, more than he would ever guess, more than she had ever liked a man, or should ever like one again—but she did not believe in him. Hers was a strangely dissatisfied and distrustful nature, and she could not set it aside for another. She did not even believe in herself—with or without good reason, as time may prove, perhaps—she was as suspicious of Lucy Jennings as of the community about her, which constituted Lucy Jennings's world; and yet, be it understood, she was a thoughtful, well-meaning, poverty-stricken mortal, who would turn up a trump card when everybody playing the game of life with her thought that she was out of trumps—as happened, for instance, four weeks afterwards.

It was the middle of June then; Reuben walked in and out of Hope Lodge at uncertain hours, early and late, according to the *Trumpet's*

claims upon his attention in town ; the firework-maker was busy at last, and the Saxe-Gotha Gardens had opened for the season, and were doing tolerably badly.

Reuben one evening had come home early and taken Tots for a walk, Myatt's Fields way, where there were "British Queens" to be purchased for a reasonable price of the strawberry grower himself, in those days not far removed from the present. Tots was fond of a walk with "Uncle Roo," and fond of strawberries during the progress of the journey, and this was one of the treats which the fine weather brought round, and to which Reuben was unselfish enough to devote his attention, when time would permit.

The big man with the beard, and the tiny child who clung to his hand and prattled all the way, were well-known figures over the open land that was still spared to suburban folk at Camberwell—father and daughter they were imagined to be by the strangers who met them *en route*.

"As if anyone would walk about as much

with a strange child as Reuben does with her!" said Miss Jennings, almost disdainfully.

A keener mind than that of her brother was that of Lucy Jennings, and yet poor, dreamy, soft-headed John had gone at once at the truth to which the other had closed her eyes systematically. "He's a man who wants something to love," the firework-maker had said on the night of Reuben's return from Worcester; and Reuben Culwick loved little Tots, though he had never explained his feelings to anyone, because she was as much alone in the world as himself, and wanted greater care.

Lucy Jennings met Reuben and Tots in Hope Street, returning from their walk.

"What a time you have been!" she said, peevishly; "did you not say you were coming home early this afternoon?"

"I don't remember."

"I wanted you to write a letter before the five o'clock post went out—the country post."

"The country post—what for?" asked Reuben.

"I have found a situation for that girl."

"What girl—Sarah Eastbell?"

"Yes. Didn't you say, sneeringly and mockingly enough, certainly, that, with my extensive chapel connection, I might hear of something for her?"

"I don't remember my sneering and mocking, Lucy."

"You said that it was likely she would drift away from right without a home, and thus it became my duty to try to do something—and I have been trying ever since."

"That's very kind of you."

"But my extensive chapel connection," she continued, with bitter emphasis, "is, after all, very poor, and fights hard for its bread—and dies fighting sometimes without it—and the chance to help any one does not come frequently."

"And it has come, then—at last."

"For your second-cousin—if she is not too proud."

"She is proud in her way, I fancy."

"You are all proud—horribly proud," said Lucy; "yours is the pride that apes hu-



mility, but it's none the less objectionable."

"I will not argue the point with you," said Reuben, easily. "Granted that I am as proud as Lucifer, what are you going to do for my Second-cousin Sarah?"

"The girl at the baker's, where we deal, is silly enough to get married the week after next—there will be wanted some one to take her place, to weigh the bread, and put the right money for it into the till afterwards. I have answered for the honesty of this second-cousin of yours."

"Thank you," said Reuben, thoughtfully. "I wish there had been less publicity about the berth, and less of the till."

"You can't trust her!"

"Yes, I can trust her, though I know so little about her. She has a good reference from her grandmother—she's evidently warm-hearted, affectionate, and honest—anyone can take care of that poor old blind woman now—and here's an opening for one of my relations. It's not a swell berth," he added, thoughtfully, "but the Culwicks and the Eastbells

are down on their luck, and Sarah's plaguy poor."

"You see that poverty's a plague, with all your talk, then!" cried Lucy, quickly.

"It's a nuisance at times," he added, drily, "and no one objects to getting away from it, though it isn't so hard to put up with as rich people fancy."

"Will you write to your cousin at once?"

"No, I will write to my aunt, and Sarah will read it aloud to her," he answered; "and now, Lucy Jennings, thank you for remembering the girl."

"I don't want any thanks."

"Who knows but that I may hear of a situation for you one of these days—eh?"

"I'll take it—I'm tired enough of Hope Lodge," she said, as she abruptly left him to proceed homewards alone. She took charge of Tots too, who was disposed to resist, until Reuben said that he had work to do, and she must go with Aunt Lucy.

Reuben Culwick wrote to Mrs. Eastbell that night, offering the situation to Sarah, to which

mention has been made, speaking of its advantages as well as he could, of the opening to an honest life, if not a brilliant opening, and intimating his wish that his cousin Sarah would consider the matter, and let him know in due course.

When he had finished his letter, he sat with his hands in his pockets staring at it for awhile, and with a slight contraction of his forehead as he gazed.

"What a poor lot we are!" he said; "what indigence it all is!"

Lucy Jennings was right. He was hardly what he seemed. He had his spasms of dissatisfaction, though his common sense quickly got over them. He had chosen his own lot, and he would not mourn at the result.

He posted his letter, and waited four days for the reply, which he considered was lacking at least in promptitude—Lucy Jennings said, in gratitude.

The answer came at length, in a thick, sprawling, downhill hand, which the blind woman might have written herself, and which was cer

tainly not Sarah Eastbell's. It was an ill-spelt and rambling epistle, that we need not give word for word. It came hoping that Reuben was well, as it left the writer and Cousin Sarah at present, and it thanked him for his thought of that cousin, who was a good girl, and would not leave her grandmother under any consideration now. Sarah was very happy and contented where she was; but it might be as well for Reuben not to trouble any more about what Mrs. Eastbell had said concerning a situation for her grand-daughter.

This epistle put Reuben Culwick out a little. It annoyed him more than he cared to confess—it even puzzled him. At variance as it was with the past anxiety of the old blind woman, and with the last letter to him, which had reached London almost as soon as himself, it was hardly the inconsistency of the whole affair which irritated and bewildered him so much, as the mystery which seemed to hang about his second-cousin's life. Why had she not written? Why was there no expression of thanks from Sarah Eastbell for his thought of her? Why

had the grandmother altered her mind in so sudden and abrupt a fashion—she who was very anxious concerning her grandchild's future when he had called at the almshouses of St. Oswalds? He would go for a long walk, and consider the matter attentively. When he wanted a good idea, he always went from the firework-maker's in search of it; it seldom came to him in that stuffy front room, but walking fast in the shade of the streets, or under the stars in the lonely road where the market-gardens and Myatt's Fields were, he generally contrived to overtake it. After all, he was an excitable fellow—"a fly-away man," Miss Jennings said, when he seemed disposed to dash too rapidly at conclusions, a fault that was somewhat prominent, considering what a philosopher he would like people to think that he was.

He started suddenly for his long walk, with Second-Cousin Sarah's want of gratitude upon his mind. It was a gala-night at the Saxe-Gotha, next door but two, and there was a heap of dirty boys and girls hanging about the front doors, where a row of coloured lamps indicated

the place to pay before admittance was gained to the splendours beyond. He had to battle his way through this little mob before he could put his long limbs into fair marching order, and then he was off at a swinging pace, befitting his size and stature, towards the Camberwell New Road, and the street on the other side of the way leading to the open ground, and the railway arches that were cropping up over it.

He walked so rapidly that in crossing the road he ran against a young woman, to whom he offered an apology for his clumsiness, and who muttered something in return, and then made so quick and sidelong a movement from him that his attention was directed towards her again.

Second-cousin Sarah!

Was it, or was it not? Was he dreaming? Had he got the girl so deeply impressed upon his mind that his thoughts had conjured up her fetch? Was it a figure born of his own fancies, or the shadow of a truth flitting by him in the dark street? No, it could not be—it was not likely—it was impossible!

Still he stood there looking after her—watching her proceed down Hope Street as though she knew the place by heart ; and as she passed under the gas-lamp, with her head very much bent forward, and a thin rag of a shawl drawn tightly round her, the black and white dress seemed even to the observant man in the background a familiar pattern, the alternate stripes of which he had last seen from the gateway of the almshouses. A striped dress of black and white was no particular novelty, but he swung himself round on his heels, and marched slowly after the receding figure—a man indisposed to believe in the coincidence, but determined to make sure that his fancies were based upon nothing more than a faint resemblance to his eccentric relative.

“Why am I troubling myself about her at all?” he said. “What am I to her?—what is she to me? Even if that were the girl suddenly turning up in my own neighbourhood, at a time when her grandmother would have me believe that she was down in Worcester, what—By George!” he exclaimed aloud, “it is she!”

The female in advance had suddenly paused on the pavement of Hope Street, injudiciously stopping beneath a second gas-lamp, and looking carefully and eagerly in the direction whence she had come, as if to re-assure herself that no one was following at her heels.

The expression on her countenance was her anxious and perplexed look, which he had seen once before, as surely as he had seen that face in Worcester. There was no doubt of it; and he increased his pace at once. The young woman beneath the lamplight wavered for an instant, and then ran for it; and Reuben, not to be outdone this time, began to run after her.

After a second hasty glance over her shoulder, and an unceremonious scattering of the boys and girls before the entrance to the Saxe-Gotha Gardens, the woman pursued darted into the establishment itself, as if the sixpence for admission might constitute an insurmountable barrier between herself and him who followed her, or as if he would not believe in anyone



with whom he was acquainted entering the place; but Reuben Culwick was in hot haste still, and gained upon her rapidly.

## CHAPTER XI.

## THE SAXE-GOTHA GARDENS.

REUBEN CULWICK lost time at the pay-office. He had no small change, and the sandy man in the cupboard on the right of the entrance took so extraordinarily long a time in finding two shillings in exchange for the half-crown he had tendered him, and in testing the quality of the coin before passing over the change, that Reuben almost imagined he was in a plot to impede his progress. Reuben did not know that shillings were as scarce at the Saxe-Gotha as orders were plentiful, and that five per cent. of the half-crowns offered the proprietor—who took his own money at the

door, like a careful man as he was—were made from the pewter pots stolen at the “publics” in the Walworth Road.

He received his change at last, and passed along an avenue of stunted trees into the gardens, which he entered for the first time in his life, despite his proximity to the establishment, and the free admissions which were floating in the neighbourhood.

He looked round very keenly, but there was no trace of Second-cousin Sarah, or of the woman whom he had taken for her, and who had run away from him. The black and white striped cotton dress had faded into thin air, or was merged in the crowd that was taking its amusement moodily.

The Saxe-Gotha was not an extensive garden, but it was easy to lose sight of anyone who had made up his or her mind to be concealed. The place was shady; there were dark and circuitous paths between thick lilac bushes, at the back of a mouldy quadrangle of arbours, and the oil lamps were burning dimly, and not too numerous. There was an effort to brighten up an

orchestra where four old fiddlers and one man with a flute were playing a waltz to funereal time, whilst a spangled mountebank was twirling on a slack-rope for the edification of the public below him ; but the place was full of shadow, befitting the strange folk who had congregated there.

Reuben was amazed at the poverty—at the squalid forms and stunted growth of the habitués—at the boys and girls with faces that belonged to people twice their age—at the obtrusive coarseness and ribaldry of their remarks—at the hoarse laugh of the men, the shrill falsetto of the women—at the unmistakable viciousness stamped upon three-fourths of the hideous crew about him. He had known something of poverty, and he had seen amidst the poverty which had confronted him, temptation and crime following upon hunger and distress ; he had written more than one leader for the *Trumpet* on the question ; but he was taken off his guard by this assemblage of the vices, in the dull and dirty gardens of the Saxe-Gotha. His own appearance was an attraction, respectability came so

seldom, and a face with an honest outlook upon it was so great a curiosity. There were human lynxes prowling about who scented prey, and some who scented danger; and he had not stood there two minutes before as many eyes were fixed on him as upon the acrobat, swinging round and round to the monotonous waltz music of the band.

The white faces and the glittering eyes seemed to close round him by slow but perceptible degrees; he was a thing of wonder worthy of grave contemplation. Reuben was not alarmed, though the public curiosity was objectionable. He looked at the orchestra; he glanced up at the acrobat, who glared down at him as at a new patron of the arts, lured to the gardens by the report of the performer's abilities perhaps; he lighted a cigar coolly and complacently, an operation which appeared to satisfy the curiosity of a few, who moved away; he strolled from the crowd to a little grass-plat, where was a time-stained fountain—a stone boy with a broken nose squirting a jet of water from a shell, with a row of paper lanterns within the

basin, where some dips were flaring; and he passed from the grass-plat to the extremity of the garden, where were John Jennings's fireworks, a scanty collection of malformed objects reared upon high poles to give an idea of importance and magnitude, and waiting John Jennings's pleasure to burst into smoke and flame. There was a figure crouching by the principal set piece, and Reuben went towards it, and discovered his landlord in lieu of his cousin. He would have backed away, but John had recognised him.

"Why, Mr. Reuben! What can you possibly want here?" he exclaimed, scrambling to his feet, "is anything wrong at home? Have you heard anything about—about the Gotha—and come to tell me?"

"No: what should I hear?"

"I was afraid—he! he!—that you'd got the tip that they were going to shut up, or suspend payment," said John, with a weak little laugh; "you gentlemen of the press get news early sometimes."

"Have you heard anything like that, then?"

asked Reuben, anxious for John Jennings, notwithstanding that he was still looking right and left for Sarah Eastbell.

"N—no; not exactly, but——"

"John, they're letting you in again," cried Reuben, as he took him by the arm and walked him towards the light; "this comes of your never showing the blackguards that contract which I wrote out for you."

"I should have offended them—I should have lost the work," said John feebly.

"All the better, I should say, for they owe you money."

It was a fact easily guessed: but John was taken aback, and gasped for breath.

"A little—a few pounds. For goodness sake, don't let Lucy know anything about it—she goes on so!"

"Yes, and you go off so, without her advice, and trust even these people."

"What are you looking round for?" asked John Jennings.

"For a girl in a black shawl and a striped cotton dress."

"Good gracious!" exclaimed John.

"She came in here, and I followed her," continued Reuben—"a pale-faced girl, with big black staring eyes. Have you seen a girl like that about?"

"Hundreds—poor wretches!"

"Not a girl with a white, sorrowful face, such as she has. I am sure it was she."

"She—who?"

"Oh, never mind," said Reuben, put on his guard at last; "this is the business of your first-floor, private and confidential, and momentous. Not a word of this to Lucy."

He had suddenly remembered that Lucy Jennings would be prejudiced still further against Sarah Eastbell, if she had an inkling of the doubts which had beset him, and it was as well that Lucy should not know at present.

"Yes—but——"

"If you say a word, I'll tell Lucy how you're being done by the Saxe-Gotha."

"They'll not do me much longer, I can tell them," said John, excited by this warning; "I'm not the man to be imposed upon, or let my fire-



works off much longer for nothing; that's not like me; that's not the style of—Hallo! look there; they're all going off without me! I thought they'd set 'em alight, if I left them for a moment—they always do."

There was a fizzing, and cracking, and spluttering from the firework-ground, and much noisy laughter from the audience. The fireworks had been discovered in an unguarded position, and sportive youths had lighted them with bowls of pipes and ends of penny pickwicks, and a violent combustion was the result.

John Jennings darted away, and Reuben Culwick moved restlessly about the gardens, scanning the pleasure-seekers, glaring into the arbours, looking down the dark avenues, and into the refreshment saloon—a long wooden shed, where no spirits were for sale, but where bottled beer and cider, apples, nuts, whelks, hot potatoes, fried fish, and stewed eels constituted the principal stock-in-trade of the purveyors.

But there was no sign of Sarah Eastbell—no

black and white striped dress even to identify its wearer by. He lingered till the last—till the crowd streamed out in hot haste, fearful of the public-houses shutting up, and the sandy-haired proprietor had left his box, and was helping to blow out the oil-lamps in the flower-beds and round the deserted orchestra.

He left John Jennings and the proprietor talking together of a speedy settlement of accounts; he even heard John Jennings say that he was in no particular hurry for a day or two, and that he was sorry to hear that the gardens were so bolstered up with orders that no one thought of paying at the doors; and then Reuben went moodily back to his lodgings, certain in his own mind that Sarah Eastbell had seen him and avoided him.

There was another Sarah Eastbell on his mind too—the old woman at St. Oswald's, down in Worcestershire. What was she doing, prostrate and blind, without her nurse, and without a friend? His father's sister lying in the darkness of her malady, helpless and deserted—the old woman who been kind to him when he was

a boy, and when the Culwicks were all poor. What of her?—and why had the girl run away from her? Well, well!—he was poor himself; he could not allow these people to oppress him in this fashion. He must mind his own business and let the mystery die out. It concerned him not; it lay apart from his pursuits and life.

He took up the current number of the *Penny Trumpet*, to refresh himself with an article of his own composition, and then an advertisement stared him in the face. “Cheap Excursion to Worcester, Malvern, and Gloucester.” A club association to start one day, and return late the same evening or early the next day, for eight shillings, and no luggage allowed. Reuben counted his shillings carefully, looked up at the ceiling, and went into an elaborate mental calculation on the spot. Yes, he would go away again.

The next day he was in Worcester, walking up the Tithing as if the place belonged to him.

## CHAPTER XII.

## AUNT EASTBELL IS STILL CONTENT.

THE ties of kindred were evidently strong with the man from whom all kindred held aloof, or Reuben Culwick would have never undertaken that journey to Worcester. He was a man perplexed by a mystery, and he hated a mystery which he had no power to solve. He was a charitable man, it may be added, and the forlorn condition of old Sarah Eastbell impressed his mind more than he could account for. Hence he had darted off at a tangent, without any great regard to his ease or his savings, in the direction of Worcester, just as he had put himself out to visit the city some weeks since, and lodged at a principal hotel for the credit of the

family name. That he was a prudent man, was a matter of doubt.

He passed through the gateway, and entered the square courtyard, where he stood looking round him as if for his Second-cousin Sarah, whose appearance seemed wanting to complete the picture. He would have been scarcely surprised to see her emerge from the door of her aunt's room, and he would have been glad, despite the wild-goose expedition which he had undertaken. The sun was bright in Worcester at last, and the quadrangle was full of light. The morning was not quite gone, for the excursion train had started early from London, travelled rapidly, and, strange to record, had not run into anything on its way.

The door of his aunt's room was open, and he walked towards it, and entered the apartment, where all was as he had expected to find it. The old woman lay in her bed as he had seen her last, a quiet, patient, trustful woman, and there was no one with her. Surely it was only yesterday that he had called at St. Oswald's.

"Who's there?" said Sarah Eastbell, sharply, as he entered.

"Your nephew," he answered, walking to the bedside.

"From Hope Lodge, Hope Street, Camberwell?—Reuben Culwick?" she inquired, as the sealed up eyes began to roll beneath the lids in their old fashion.

"Yes. What a memory you have!" he replied.

She stretched her hand from the bed in the direction of the voice, and Reuben took the old woman's thin hand in his.

"You bring me good news," she said, "and I have been waiting for it. I am glad that you have come!"

"I have brought no news, either good or bad, Aunt Eastbell," he hastened to assure her, as he sat down at her bedside.

"Oh! how's that?"

"What good news did you expect?" he asked curiously, and the old woman was a long while in replying.

"I am always waiting for good news," she

said at last ; " didn't I tell you so when you were here in May ? Good news of your father for instance, of his becoming better friends with you, of his coming to this place to see the only sister he has left. Poor fellow, he must be dreadfully dull in that big house of his."

" You received my letter about Sarah ?"

" Yes. It was kind of you to think of her."

" Where is she ?" said Reuben Culwick, sharply.

Aunt Eastbell was endeavouring to deceive him, and he had not come more than a hundred and twenty miles to be hoodwinked by a blind woman.

" Well," replied Mrs. Eastbell, after another pause for consideration, " she has gone away for a little change. She will be back soon."

" Is she in London ?"

" Yes."

" Then who wrote me that letter leading me to believe that she was with you still ?"

" Why, Reuben, boy, you are cross about it ! How's this ?" and the thin hand groped its way

towards him again. He rested his own upon it, and said—

“There was an effort made to mislead me. Why?”

“Well—it saved a fuss,” Mrs. Eastbell confessed at last, “and as Sarah did not come back to answer your letter for herself, I got Mrs. Muggeridge next door to write a line or two. But they were all our dear Sarah’s sentiments—Sally said, after you had gone, that she should never think of leaving me, or getting a place till after I was dead. And as I mayn’t die for many years, what’s the use of worriting?”

“Ay—what’s the use?” said Reuben dreamily.

“It’s worrit that walks off with half of us. It’s a great mercy that I have never had anything to worrit me, but have been easy and comfortable, all my precious life.”

“What made Sarah leave you?”

“Why, Tom came back from sea.”

“Her brother?”

“Yes, her brother—a fine strapping young



fellow, who has got on in the world—that's the first Eastbell who has done that, Reuben. He came here to see me at once, the Lord bless him!" the old lady continued, "and insisted upon giving Sally a bit of a change before he went away on board ship again, and the child wanted change, and they said looked ill, and so I persuaded her to go. I should have gone myself for a bit of a holiday with them, only I haven't been able lately to get about as briskly as I could wish. I'm not always flopping in bed like this, you know."

"Ah!—and she went away with her dear brother Tom?" said Reuben.

"Yes."

"Has she written to you since?"

"To be sure. There's a letter of hers on the mantelpiece now."

Reuben Culwick walked across to the high mantelpiece, and took down a letter therefrom.

"May I read it?" he asked when the letter was in his hand, and the instinct of the gentleman had asserted itself suddenly.

"To be sure," was the reply; "read it out,

Reuben—I love to hear my Sally's letters read over and over to me, till I get them by heart like. There's a great deal of sense in Sally's letters, and she's a very clever gal."

The old lady crossed her hands over her chest in a monumental-effigy style, and lay there almost as rigid and grim, until a fly settled on her face, when she made an impatient claw at it before re-assuming her position of attention.

Reuben Culwick was in no hurry to read the letter aloud. To his surprise it was a letter addressed to two persons, the second one being communicated with in lead-pencil at the top of the paper. Sarah Eastbell wrote a good hand—at one time or another there had been some education given and made use of—the old woman had seen after her grand-daughter, when the father who had seen after nobody, not even himself, had been called to his account.

"*Don't read this to grandmother,*" was written in lead-pencil, and in a fair flowing hand, quite a lady's hand. "Keep her as cheerful as you can without me. Let her think that I am coming back soon—that I am happy with Tom,

and that he is very kind. I can't think of breaking the truth to her yet, that I can never, never come back any more.—S. E.”

“Who reads the letters to you, aunt?” he asked curiously.

“Mrs. Muggeridge, or Mrs. Muggeridge's niece—the niece generally, because the old lady stammers dreadful, and puts me out in trying to listen to her. She's a great age, and can't help stammering, poor body,” she added reflectively; “I ought not to be snappish with her. I shall be as old myself some day, and have a mouth as full of plums perhaps.”

“Now, why are all these people humbugging this poor woman?” muttered Reuben, as he took a great handful of his beard into consideration with him.

He had spoken very low, but Mrs. Eastbell had quick ears, and had heard something.

“We haven't a bug in the place, Reuben—but oh! the flies they're awful!”

Reuben read aloud Sarah's epistle to her grandmother. It was a long letter, and full of a fancy picture of how she was enjoying herself

with Tom, what a holiday hers was, and how kind her brother was to her. She concluded with a promise of being back in Worcester shortly, and a hope that her grandmother was not dull without her, and she was always her affectionate and loving grand-daughter, Sarah Eastbell.

"There, don't you call that a nice letter?" said the old lady admiringly when he had concluded.

"A very nice letter indeed!"

"Ah! and she's a nice gal too! I try not to miss her, and not to feel lonely now she's gone, but it won't do quite. Will you just read that letter over again, Reuben, if you don't mind? I can almost fancy that she is here, and that she speaks to me with the old gentleness I know so well, and—love so much! So soothing-like."

Reuben Culwick read the letter again, and it was sufficiently soothing in this instance to send his aunt to sleep. He was sure that she was asleep by her regular breathing, and the silence which followed the conclusion of his reading. Reuben Culwick stood by the mantelpiece, let-

ter in hand, endeavouring to read the story for himself, and to understand the character of his cousin more clearly by its lines. Sarah was away with Tom Eastbell, her promising brother, who was getting on so well towards the gallows, she had said herself bitterly and scornfully. She had deceived the grandmother all her life, for the sake of the old woman's peace of mind, and then she had deserted her. That last step was incomprehensible to him—would old Mother Muggeridge solve it, or old Mother Muggeridge's niece?

Whilst he meditated, a very sallow face chiselled deeply with ridges peered round the room-door, and two greenish eyes blinked at him through spectacles with wide horn rims.

"Oh! I beg your pardon—are you the new doctor?" said the head.

The voice did not arouse Mrs. Eastbell, and Reuben crossed the room cautiously, and backed this new old lady into the quadrangle.

"How do you find yourself this morning, Mrs. Muggeridge?" he said.

"Terribly badly, thank you, sir," said the

lady—as thin and small a woman as could possibly live, but evidently as agile as a grasshopper —“and how’s that poor old soul to-day?”

“Cheerful—hopeful.”

“Ah! it’s a wonder how she does it,” said Mrs. Muggeridge, speaking so thickly that Reuben remembered all about the plums at once, “but then she hasn’t got my spasms. Your worthy successor,” she said, shaking her head so energetically that Reuben stood on guard, perfectly prepared to catch it, if she shook it off along with her spectacles, “said I must bear them as well as I could. That’s very fine advice from a man who has never had spasms inside him—which I trust may not be your case either, sir.”

“Thank you.”

“For these awful spasms of mine——”

“One moment, Mrs. Muggeridge,” Reuben hastened to explain; “I am not the new doctor—but a friend of Mrs. Eastbell’s.”

“Oh! indeed.”

“And I want you or your niece to tell me about Mrs. Eastbell’s grand-daughter—where she has gone, and why she has gone.”

“My niece!” said Mrs. Muggeridge, shaking her head again, “ah! that’s a little trick to keep that poor old soul going a bit till we take her off to the cemetery—which can’t be very long now. The young lady thought it would be the better plan not to tell her anything.”

“What young lady?”

“She who comes once or twice a day now—just to see her. Why, here she is, to be sure!”

Reuben turned and looked towards the gateway, where from the shadows into the warm sunshine beyond stepped the young lady whom he had seen first in his father’s house.

## CHAPTER XIII.

## SARAH'S ABSENCE IS EXPLAINED.

REUBEN CULWICK'S astonishment was great, but the young lady's surprise was still more strongly marked, upon perceiving who it was standing in the courtyard of St. Oswald's. She stopped, clasped her hands together, and then came on again, with two large clear grey eyes distended.

"Mr. Culwick! you in Worcester!"

"Yes—it is remarkable."

"You have repented—you are going to your father?"

Reuben shook his head, and smiled a little.

"I told my father that I would not come again to Sedge Hill until he sent for me, and I shall never break my word."



"Yes, you are a foolish fellow," she said, looking at him, "and almost as strange a man as your father is. Are you still living down that wretched street in Camberwell?"

"I can only afford to live in wretched streets," was the reply.

"What has brought you to Worcester?"

"An excursion train."

"You know what I mean," she said, tetchily, "what errand?"

"To see Aunt Eastbell," he replied, "and to discover, if possible, the mystery of Second-cousin Sarah."

"What has Aunt Eastbell or your second-cousin to do with you?" she asked.

"They are my relatives—I am more interested in them than I can explain. May I ask in return what Aunt Eastbell and my cousin have to do with you?"

"I am interested in them more than I can explain," was the arch answer, "that's all."

"I wish to heaven you would explain something. Who are you, to begin with?"

"Ah! that's not worth elucidation," she said,

after a moment's silence. "If I tell you that my name is Holland, will that make the position any clearer?"

"It might," said Reuben, quickly. "My father wished me to marry a Miss Holland once, a young lady whom I had never seen, and whom I was to take upon trust. Are you the lady?"

"Yes, sir."

She dropped one of those odd little ironical curtseys which had bewildered him before that day, and he regarded her with great attention. This was the lady, then, on whom he had turned his back, about whom he had quarrelled with his father, and to avoid whom he had gone to his mother's home, and the poverty on which that mother had prided herself. Why had the mother forbidden the match in eager haste?

"And have you married my father instead of me?" he asked, satirically.

"I would not marry either of you for twice your father's money," she said, frankly—rather pertly, Reuben considered,—“I am simply his housekeeper, at a housekeeper's wage. My

father was his friend, and your father has been kind to me, in his odd way, since my father's death."

She would come into all his father's money, he was sure. Well, it was probably in good hands, he thought; and the expression on his face must have been peculiar, for she read part of it at least.

"But he will not leave me any of his fortune—I am not to build upon that in any way."

"He has told you so?"

"Yes."

"You will be thrown on the world without any compunction, for Simon Culwick has a bad habit of keeping his word, Miss Holland."

"Yes, that's the worst of it."

He thought that she was returning sarcasm for sarcasm, but he was not quite certain, she kept so demure and grave a countenance.

It was a singular position, those two whom the father had wanted to bring together, and whom his own stubbornness had set asunder.

"And now," said Reuben, returning suddenly to the object which had brought him to Wor-

cester thus early, "will you try and explain why you are interested in Aunt Eastbell, to begin with?—why the girl who has deserted her corresponds with you?—why you pass yourself off as the niece of that old woman who has left us?"

"I'll work backwards, if you will allow me," she said. "I call myself Miss Muggeridge because the name of Holland is familiar to your aunt, and I don't want more explanations than I can help in this place—the girl corresponds with me because she knows that I read her letters to her grandmother, and that I am the grandmother's friend whilst she is away—I am interested in Mrs. Eastbell, and feel for the utter loneliness in which she is left by her friends. I have been interested in Mrs. Eastbell for some years now, for the matter of that."

"Indeed! and her grand-daughter, Sarah Eastbell, also?"

"Of late days—a little. She was not very gracious to me—she never cared to see me here. When she got into trouble, she thought

that she would make me her confidante, but it was too late."

"When she got into trouble!" echoed Reuben; "what trouble was that?"

"Come with me, and I'll show you."

She led the way out of St. Oswald's into the Tithing, crossed the road to the corner of the street leading to the prison, and pointed to the wall, on which several bills were posted. One was to the effect that a reward of five pounds was offered for the apprehension of Sarah Eastbell, late of Worcester, who had conspired with others for the unlawful issue of spurious coin, and who was last seen in the town at the end of May of that year.

Reuben stared with amazement at the placard.

"It is well that the old woman is blind," he murmured. "I did not think it was so bad as this."

"Neither is it."

"You mean that——"

"That her brother is at the bottom of it.

You don't know what a scamp he is, I suppose?"

"I have had my suspicions."

"This Tom Eastbell gave her the money, I believe. She offered a sovereign in all good faith—it was detected as false coin—she was asked where she lived, and how she became possessed of it, and she took flight and ran away. They found out presently her name and address, but she had left Worcester."

"Is she with her brother?"

"Yes."

"That's bad."

"She wrote to me without giving her address, stating that she must remain with her brother Thomas for a while. He was in business, and was taking care of her. She left Grandmother Eastbell in my charge, she said. It's a responsibility," she added, "but I have accepted it."

"You are very kind."

They walked back together to the almshouses. When they were in the courtyard she said—

"Have you come all the way to Worcester to find out the truth of this?"

"Yes."

"Your second-cousin must have interested you very strangely."

"Yes," he responded. "I saw, as I thought, a strong, self-reliant, earnest nature by the side of that old woman. I saw much sacrifice of self in one who might have grown up very selfish, and it was a character that deeply interested me."

"There are good points in Sarah Eastbell—there are now, for that matter. But she is in bad hands."

"I fear so."

"If you could find out where she is, it might be possible to save her."

"I saw her last night."

"Where?"

Reuben related the story of his discovery of Sarah Eastbell, of her flight from him, and the way in which he had lost her in the gardens of Saxe-Gotha. Miss Holland reflected for a few moments, then she said—

"I wonder if her brother performs there?"

"Is he a performer, then?"

"An acrobat at times. When he was first in prison, he was arrested in his tumbler's dress."

"In prison—an acrobat!"

Reuben Culwick remembered at once the man who had been spinning round on the slack-rope at the Saxe-Gotha, when he had first entered the gardens. Could that be Tom Eastbell, the scamp who had brought his sister into difficulties, who had caused her to fly from Worcester in order to escape the charge of uttering base coin—in all probability to escape the gaol?

"If that's Thomas Eastbell, Sarah is easily found."

"But not easily rescued."

"I will make the attempt," said Reuben.

On the following evening Reuben Culwick was in the Saxe-Gotha Gardens again, waiting patiently for the appearance of Signor Vizzobini, who had postponed his departure for Turin for six nights, by special request of the nobility, gentry and public in general, and who



was announced to appear every evening at half-past nine, in his highly graceful and artistic entertainment, as performed before all the crowned heads of Europe, to the immense delight and manifest satisfaction of every crowned head amongst them.

## CHAPTER XIV.

## SIGNOR VIZZOBINI.

THE Saxe-Gotha Gardens were not doing well. Even the re-engagement of Signor Vizzobini had not aroused the locality to enthusiasm. The people had grown tired of the Saxe-Gotha, and even the orders were slow in coming in. The dancing license had been suspended also, and the patrons and patronesses of the gardens found it dreary work, promenading round the refreshment shed, and the stone boy with the everlasting squirt.

It was a terribly dull evening, even for the Saxe-Gotha, Reuben Culwick discovered, when

he had entered for the second time on what the programme informed him was a fairy tableau of surpassing brilliancy and splendour; but seen under the aspect of a damp and drizzling night, the brilliancy was impaired and the splendour was nowhere. The orders which had been most freely circulated in the neighbourhood, in the hope that free admissions would drink a little when they did come, had not responded gratefully to the invitation; and there was but a sparse representation of humanity, which huddled itself under the broad eaves of the shed, and stared dismally at the wet trees opposite. The lamps had not been all lighted, after the proprietor had discovered that the receipts at the doors would not cover the consumption of oil and candles; but the band, that was paid by the week, was permitted to play on along with the fountain, which, as the collector of water-rates had threatened to cut off the supply in a day or two, was going it most vigorously.

It was a more respectable evening than ordinary, owing to the scanty attendance. The immense army of the disreputables haunting the

shady corners of South London, was shy of the open air when rain was falling—uncleanness and squalor hated getting wet, and found a difficulty in getting dry again, with no change of clothes to speak of; hence a few specimens of honest indigence, yearning for any contrast to close alleys and foetid rooms, had found their way to Hope Street. It had been announced as a juvenile night also, with the fireworks at an early hour; and a few intrepid mothers had brought babies in arms and young children to the spectacle, and were indignant at the announcement written in text hand, and affixed with red wafers to the trunk of a tree, that "In consequence of the inclemency of the weather, the pyrotechnic display by Mr. Jennings is postponed till the next gala-night." Still there was music in the orchestra, and Signor Vizzobini would appear in due course; and what there was of audience—Mr. Splud, lessee, counted fifty-two with the babies in arms—kept to the shelter of the lilac bushes or the refreshment shed, or dragged their adventurous way through the puddles lying in the paths.

Reuben Culwick stood under a shady tree, smoking. With a pipe in his mouth, an old blue Scotch cap drawn down to his eyebrows, and a waterproof coat, with its shiny collar turned up to his ears, he looked more in tone with the assemblage than he had done on the occasion of his extempore visit two nights since. He had a hope that in this guise he should not attract any notice, but although he evaded a portion of it, there were curious eyes fixed on him now and then, and one mind perplexed by his appearance. That one mind, represented by no less a personage than the lessee himself, directed its particular attention to him about a quarter to nine o'clock. Mr. Splud had given up the idea of a further influx of company, and had put his head gardener—he had one gardener and a little boy to attend to the grounds during the season—at the pay office, whilst he mixed in a friendly way with the company. He was a tall, lank man, with sandy hair, and of a melancholy aspect; keeping gardens open under difficulties had quenched every atom of cheerfulness in him. He had two bead-like eyes, that

he had a habit of rolling into their corners and looking out of them side-wise at the object which he desired to inspect, that gave him a somewhat sly appearance also; and this was remarkable as he took his stand under the tree where Reuben was, and smoked and expectorated, as vehemently as if he had a match on against time.

"This is a bad night for our business, sir," he said at last.

Reuben had anticipated that the proprietor would burst into conversation, and was disposed to encourage it.

"So I should think," answered Reuben.

"Rain always keeps the people away; no matter what you offer them in the way of attraction—they won't come, sir."

"No—they evidently won't come," echoed Reuben.

"You must not take this evening, or the last evening on which you favoured us," said the proprietor, startling Reuben a little by the remark, "as a sample of the general style of patronage we get."

"No?" said Reuben, interrogatively.

"I have known fifty thousand people here."

"That's a very fair number, I should say," Reuben remarked quietly.

"Yes—pretty fair—but we ought to have them. It's a nice cool place."

Reuben was shivering to the marrow, and instantly agreed with him.

"And where are the people to go, if they don't come here?" asked Mr. Splud.

Reuben could not imagine. He had never thought of that.

"People in this part of London, I mean," he added more modestly, "although we have hundreds of West-end swells, who come to look about them, like yourself, sir."

Here the eyes remained so long in the corners nearest to Reuben, that Reuben was afraid that Mr. Splud's vision had become permanently fixed.

"Unless you are looking for anybody in particular—as may be the case, you know—and perhaps I can help you," suggested Mr. Splud.

"Thank you," said Reuben.

There was a long pause, and then the proprietor said slowly—

“In the police, I think?”

“No—not in the police.”

“You haven’t come from Blater’s, I suppose?”

No—Reuben had not come from Blater’s, though who Blater was, he was never curious enough to inquire. Probably some one who had lent Mr. Splud money or goods, for a sigh of relief struggled from the lessee’s narrow chest.

“Because I have seen you somewhere, and that is what bothers me a bit,” said Mr. Splud, by way of explanation and apology for his numerous questions.

Reuben did not tell him that he was lodging next door but two, and that they had passed each other in the street with tolerable frequency; but the idea had suggested itself to put a few questions on his own account, and even to throw an air of mystery, a detective policeman’s air of mystery, over his inquiries, when a third person, smoking a short pipe, joined



them. The new-comer was a small spare man, in a long seedy great-coat with big horn buttons, extending from his chin to his heels, and who wore a dirty yellow handkerchief tied loosely round his throat. He was a man of an unearthly pallor, and pitted so deeply with small-pox that one wondered how he had ever struggled out of his malady alive. It was an unpleasant face to regard closely, and the red ferrety eyelids, and the small sunken black eyes, did not redeem in any way the general ugliness of the new-comer. He came up with his hands and half his arms thrust into the side-pockets of his coat, and talked to Mr. Splud, with his little eyes regarding Reuben Culwick from their corners in the lessee's own peculiar way.

"You don't want me to-night, I suppose?" he said to the proprietor.

"Yes, I do want you."

"What for?"

"Because I pay you," said Mr. Splud, sharply; "you don't want your money next Saturday, I suppose?" he asked, with so much

biting sarcasm in the question that he showed every yellow tooth in his head—and uncommonly yellow they all were—at the gentleman whom he addressed.

“Yes, I do—and I’ll take care I get it,” said the other, far from civilly, “along with last week’s.”

“Well, I wish you *may* get it—but you’ll have to do your work for it.”

“What’s the use of dressing up, and a performing in the blessed rain”—he did not call it blessed rain, however—“before nobody. There’s nobody here, there’s nobody coming—and it’s a beastly shame on me.”

“The gardens are open—the public expects to be amused,” said the lessee grandiloquently, “and it is not the mission of Samuel Splud to break faith with the public. If there were only one child in the gardens on this unfortunate juvenile evening, and that child were fast asleep and clasped to the fond bosom of its mother, I would carry out the programme in its entirety, or perish in the attempt to do my duty to my patrons. It is the knowledge that I keep faith

with the public that renders the Saxe-Gotha the most popular place of recreation on this side of the Thames."

The man marked with the small-pox opened his mouth in amazement at this long address, and turned suddenly to Reuben at its conclusion.

"You're going to take the crib off of his hands, I see—buy him out, and his goodwill and fixtures and all?"

Mr. Splud appeared to be annoyed at this, and said,

"If the gentleman has any idea of that kind, he will talk to me, not you."

"I have no idea of purchase," said Reuben, "and if I have the honour of addressing Signor Vizzobini, I may add that I have come here this evening expressly to witness his performance."

"Have you, though?" said the acrobat, once more surprised, and in an extraordinary degree, by this explanation; "good Lord!"

"You may well be astonished. I am," said Mr. Splud sarcastically again.

"Well—if you can't let a fellow off, I'll go and dress," said Vizzobini, and after another sharp glance at our hero, he walked away in deep thought.

"I think you said that you were *not* in the police, sir?" observed Mr. Splud with great urbanity.

"Certainly not."

"The same idea has suggested itself to my employé, at all events, and you have rendered him extremely uncomfortable, but it serves him right. He's an ill-tempered, hateful, insolent cur, and, Heaven be praised, next Saturday sees the last of him."

"He will leave the gardens perhaps?"

"I wish he would. It would be breach of contract, and I should not pay him a farthing."

Reuben moved towards the entrance gates, and Mr. Splud laughed for the first time—laughed so heartily that it was evident it was only bad luck that kept his spirits at zero.

"Oh! not in the police at all—certainly not," he said knowingly; "but you need not be

afraid of losing your man. He has gone into the room under the orchestra to dress."

Reuben returned to his place beneath the tree, and Mr. Splud once more joined him.

"What's the case—murder, or burglary, or petty theft? They are all three in his line, I fancy."

"Do you know anything of him?"

"Only that he is a vagabond not up to his work," said Mr. Splud. "I took him by advertisement, on the faith of his recommendations, which I firmly believe now are forgeries. He has fallen off three times this week, and if he breaks his neck one of these fine days, it will be a happy release to the profession. I shan't go into superfine black for him myself," he added vindictively.

"Why did you re-engage him?"

"I didn't, sir—it was all in the first contract—only it became necessary to puff him. Fancy a man of my attainments reduced to puffing that brute!" and here a real tear made its appearance at one of the favourite corners of his eyes, and trickled forlornly down his cheek.

"I haven't been used to this kind of thing," said Mr. Splud, by way of apology for his weakness; "I have been in a large way of theatrical business—real horses—legitimate drama, over the water, sir."

"What is that man's real name?" asked Reuben.

"I haven't the slightest idea; Jack Sheppard perhaps."

"You know his address, surely?"

"Oh! yes. No. 2, Potter's Court, Walworth Road."

"Thank you. Good night."

Reuben Culwick was gone. Even Signor Vizzobini observed it, when he was sitting astride an uncomfortably wet rope, with the rain pouring down on his fleshings and spangles, and the band wheezing out its melancholy old waltz. Signor Vizzobini looked down at the lamps and scanty audience, and at the lessee standing below and sneering at him; but of the stranger, lured to the Saxe-Gotha by the report of his abilities, there was not a sign. Vizzobini's feelings were hurt, for he muttered

“What a liar I” before commencing his performance, which he hurried through in such indecent haste that Mr. Splud was more than ever disgusted with his contract with him.

## CHAPTER XV.

## FOUND.

NO. 2, Potter's Court, Walworth Road, was somewhat difficult to find ; but by aid of a few inquiries from the police, Reuben Culwick discovered it amongst a nest of little streets halfway towards the Elephant and Castle.

Potter's Court was not a cheerful thoroughfare at that time of night, and it required a fair amount of nerve—which our hero did not lack, however—to descend three or four broken steps at the entrance, and dive into the darkness that stretched beyond them.

The gas-light at the top of the steps down which the indiscreet traveller and the tipsy tenants of Potter's Court were continually



floundering, shed but little light upon the first few yards of the way, and was of no service at the extremity of the passage, where, it was rumoured, murder had been done once, with no one the wiser till the morning.

Potter's Court, Walworth Road, bore an ugly name, and its lank, dingy tenements were full of "ugly customers." There were all degrees of ugliness—the hideous and variable ugliness of crime—in Potter's Court, and but a few specimens of honest industry, or of poverty rendered respectable, or heroic, by its struggle to keep out of the workhouse. The "dangerous classes" had the place pretty well to themselves, and were called for frequently by enterprising gentlemen with numbers on their collars; it was a thoroughfare with a brand upon it—a jungle where the wild beasts of the streets herded together, and shunned the light, after the habits of their kind.

Reuben Culwick knew nothing of Potter's Court; but he muttered, "Poor Sarah!" as he went down the cavernous entry in search of No. 2.

There were several lodging-houses in the court, with "Beds, Threepence per Night," written over the front door, although the hour was too late to read the inscriptions; but No. 2 was a private house in its way, with a family on each floor, and the door left open for the convenience of the tenants, like a house in a Glasgow close.

Reuben knocked at the parlour door with the handle of his stick, and a grim-looking individual in his shirt-sleeves answered the appeal, and stood with a light in his hand, glaring at the intruder.

"What's up?" he said, in not too civil a style of address.

"Does a Mr. Eastbell live here?"

"Don't think he does."

"Do you know a Mr. Vizzobini?" said Reuben, suddenly recollecting himself, and thinking also that, for reasons too numerous to mention, Thomas Eastbell, late of Worcester, might have arrived in London incognito.

"Fitser—who?"

"He performs at the Saxe-Gotha Gardens on

the slack-rope," Reuben explained still further.

"Oh, that bloke," said the parlour floor, disparagingly; "top of the 'ouse—front room."

"Thank you."

The man slammed the door upon our hero, and did not wait for his thanks; but as Reuben went up the dark stairs, it is worthy of remark that he came softly into the passage again, and stood there listening to the firm regular tread of him who ascended thus fearlessly. When the footsteps were echoing up the second flight, the man put his head into the court, looked steadily along its whole length, to the dingy lamp at the top of the distant steps, and then drew back into the shadow again.

"Cheek!" he muttered; "a friend, or information received? Here, Pincher."

Pincher, a wiry little terrier that in the darkness might have passed for a rat, darted from the room at his master's call, and, as if trained to the business—and it was highly probable that it was—darted up-stairs with a rattling, scuffling noise, passed Reuben, and commenced barking vociferously when it had

reached the top landing, where Reuben presently followed, with his hand clutching carefully at his stick, prepared to brain Pincher on the spot, should it make a sally at his lower extremities. But the animal was content to sit on its hind-legs and bark, and howl, and shriek, like a dog in a rat-trap, or under the wheel of a waggon.

Reuben reached the front-room door with his stick, and rapped gently but emphatically against the panel. The dog ceased barking when he had knocked, and went scuffling to the bottom of the stairs again, where his master picked him up by the nape of the neck, and carried him indoors.

Meanwhile Reuben, after waiting patiently for a reply to his summons, knocked again.

"Who's there?" said a faint weak voice, which Reuben did not recognise.

"A friend."

"We've no friends here."

"I come from the Saxe-Gotha."

"From Tom?"

"Yes."

"Oh!"

The door was cautiously opened, and there streamed through the aperture, through which a woman's face was peering—white, and wan, and pinched—a rush of hot air as from a furnace-mouth.

"Is he locked up?" said the woman, somewhat apathetically.

"No. He will be back presently, I think."

"I thought he was locked up. Do you want to come in?"

"Yes."

"Come in if you like, then—we don't charge any more," she said, with a sombre flippancy, that sat particularly ill upon her, and which was followed by a violent fit of coughing that took her strength away completely.

The woman, who wore no boots, crawled back to the side of a big fire that was blazing inappropriately in the grate that Summer night, sat down in the chair she had quitted, and leaned her head against the wall, tired out and faint.

But it was not this woman at whom he gazed

so intently as at the figure of a girl in a striped cotton dress, who lay face foremost on the patch-work counterpane of the bed, and whose face was hidden by her hands. It was a figure of despair that thrilled him; it was surely Second-cousin Sarah cowering from him in that hour of her discovery.

The woman, with her head against the wall, observed the intent gaze of Reuben in the direction of the prostrate girl.

"She's asleep; you need not mind her."

"Are you sure?"

"As sure as I'm a living soul—or a living skeleton. She's been like that for hours, the silly!"

"Why silly?"

"Because she—Here, I say, what's your message?" asked the woman, putting a sudden check upon her volubility, "what have you got to say about Tom, and what has Tom to say?"

"Are you Tom's wife?"

"Yes, I am."

"And that's Tom's sister?"

"What of it?" was the rejoinder.

"From St. Oswald's Almshouses, Worcester?"

"Eh—yes. You're pat enough with your facts. How did you get them? If you've come for her, I—I——"

Here she burst into a second paroxysm of coughing, for the cessation of which Reuben waited patiently, keeping his eyes upon the prostrate figure, and doubtful still if it were sleep that kept Sarah dumb and passive. It was a violent cough, that of Mrs. Eastbell, which was rending away all the life that was left in the sufferer, who carried consumption in every look and fitful breath. The woman struggled and choked for awhile, with her thin hands pressed to her side.

"Yours is a bad cough," Reuben said at last.

"There's not much more left of it, or me," was the callous answer, "and thank God for it!"

"Is not the room too hot for you?"

The woman shook her hand.

It was an unhealthy air that the huge fire had burned up, and there was a strange smell

of hot metal, for which Reuben could not account, and which the flat-iron on the hob, had it been in the most active service of ironing, could scarcely stand as an excuse for. An extensive plumbing job would have left traces in the atmosphere like unto it, possibly.

"You have come for her," said Mrs. Eastbell in a husky voice, returning once more to the subject which had brought on her paroxysm of coughing, "but you can't prove nothing."

Once more had his manner and appearance suggested a detective officer—it was only the policeman who haunted such places as he had seen to-night, and who made himself obtrusive and objectionable.

"Yes, I have come for her, if she'll trust me."

"You're just the chap for the likes of us to trust," said Mrs. Eastbell, ironically, "and poor Sally is sure to be uncommon glad to see you. Not that she'll mind much which way it is, for she's been awful down."

"Indeed! Has she?"

"If it ain't Worcester Prison, it'll be the Surrey Canal. Here—hi—Sally!" screamed the



woman, "you're fetched, my gal. Here's a cove from Worcester says he wants you partikler."

The girl lying upon the bed sprang up on her hands at once, and glared towards them both, shaking her long black hair from her head as she did so. Her face was flushed with sleep, but the pallor rapidly stole over it as she recognised Reuben Culwick standing by the fireplace observing her.

## CHAPTER XVI.

## THE APPEAL.

“**M**R. CULWICK!” Sarah Eastbell whispered to herself.

“Yes—it is I,” said Reuben.

“What can you want?” she murmured—  
“what has made *you* come in search of me?”

“To help you,” was the answer, “for I am afraid that you are in bad hands, and I wish to take you from them.”

Sarah Eastbell was sitting on the side of the bed now, with her big dark eyes regarding the speaker, and her hands clasped together tightly.

“It is too late,” she muttered.

“I hope not.”

"Oh, yes," she replied, with grim confidence in her assertion, "by a long sight. Ah! when I saw you last, I did not think that it would come to this, sir—that I should have to run away from grandmother. I felt so strong I was sure that I should grow stronger as I got to be more of a woman; and see now where I am. Oh! my God, see now!" cried Sarah Eastbell with a sudden passion, as she raised her hands above her head in angry protest against her own ill-fate.

"I don't see what's the use of shrieking out like that," said Mrs. Eastbell reprovingly; "they'll think down-stairs we're a-murdering of you. You came away with Tom of your own accord—didn't you? and Tom and I has taken care of you since, and kept you out of the way of the perlice—hasn't us? This isn't such a sight of complaint to bring against a hard-working couple, is it, Mr. Cutstick?"

"You came to London with your brother?" said Reuben to his cousin.

"What was I to do?" replied the girl; "it was that or the prison, though I wouldn't have

cared for the prison so very much, only they would have come to the almshouses and taken me away from that poor old woman, who would have thought the worst of me for ever afterwards."

"I don't think she would."

"I have told her so many lies," said Sarah moodily, "and they would have all come out, and set her against me."

"They were white lies, to keep her mind at rest."

"Ah! but what a lot of them there were!" said Sarah; "why, I began to lie for the sake of lying at last, for the sake of brightening her up when she was dull, just as I do now by letter. I used to invent all kinds of— Oh! I can't think of it any more—I can't—I daren't. If I could only die now!"

"Sarah Eastbell, you must come away with me," said Reuben firmly.

"No," was the reply; "it's only by hiding here that I'm safe. They're after me still— everywhere," she added with a shudder.

"Your brother tells you that?"

"I know it for myself too well."

"Did you attempt to pass bad money in Worcester, then?"

"Yes."

"Knowing it to be bad?"

"No, no—I did not know that. Somebody gave it me—I won't say who it was—to get change, and then pay myself what was owing, and——"

"Sarah!" cried Mrs. Eastbell, "the least said about it to this gent, the better."

"Come with me to Worcester, and tell the story for yourself," said Reuben; "I will stand by you."

"And see you carried off to gaol," said Mrs. Eastbell. "Well, that's pretty nice advice for a man to give a weak young thing like you."

"No, no—let me be, please; what's the use?" muttered Sarah Eastbell; "I must go on as I am—there's no help for me; I'm past your help, Mr. Culwick—though I didn't think you were so good a man as this," she added, with a strange yearning look towards him, "or that you would take all this trouble, and I'm thank-

ful—very—but to get away from here is to kill the only friend I ever had.”

“Your grandmother?”

“Yes.”

“She may hear of this at any moment.”

“Ay—she may,” said Sarah Eastbell sadly, “and then she will die.”

“Have you any idea of what your future life is to be in this place?” asked Reuben.

“I haven’t thought much. I can’t think,” replied his cousin with strange helplessness. “I mayn’t come to much harm—I don’t know.”

“Would not anything be better than remaining?”

“There’s no getting away,” answered Sarah; “ask her.”

“Tom wouldn’t like it,” said Mrs. Eastbell thus appealed to. “Sally’s handy.”

“And Sally knows too much,” added the girl scornfully, “and if she moved one step away from home—see, this is my home!” she cried with another exhibition of passion, as she looked round the four walls of the squalid room—“they would tell the police where to find me.”

"I wouldn't, Sally," said the woman, raising her head from the wall, and inclining it forward in her self-defence.

"You know who would."

"Ah! I can't answer for him," replied Mrs. Eastbell, leaning her head back again; "when his back's up he don't much mind what he does, certainly, and misfortun' has soured him awful."

"Your husband?" inquired Reuben.

"I don't mention no names," said the woman with low cunning.

Sarah left the side of the bed, and walked to the door, which she opened and listened at.

"I'd go now," she said anxiously to Reuben; "it's no use stopping longer—it isn't safe."

Reuben was puzzled at her manner, and perplexed by her stubbornness. Here was a girl in the toils—a woman hemmed in, and who, without money or friends, without hope even, must infallibly give up. He felt almost powerless in the matter; and yet she had been an unselfish and honest girl, and might under other circumstances have been so easily saved. There was one more train of reasoning to urge—he could

not leave her to her fate without a struggle.

"I saw your grandmother yesterday."

"You did?" exclaimed she—"at Worcester?"

"Yes."

"I hope she was well—that she didn't know anything?" was the eager questioning.

"No—she lay there just as I saw her weeks ago, very patient, very gentle, and very full of love for you. She was waiting for her granddaughter to come back."

"Ah! if I could."

"Couldn't she come to you? I don't mean at once," he added, as Sarah recoiled at the suggestion, "but after you had left here and got some situation, which might enable you to hire a room for her. A friend of mine has found a situation for you already, and I will be security for your faithful service, until they learn to trust you for yourself."

Sarah broke down at last. The thin little hands went up quickly to the face, and she sobbed forth—

"God bless you, sir; but don't—oh, don't say another word!"



Reuben Culwick, carried away by his theme, seized his advantage and went on. He had one object in life now—to get Sarah Eastbell from that house.

“Why, you are my cousin,” he said earnestly, “and why shouldn’t I help you for your own sake, as well as for the sake of that old woman grieving for you down in Worcester? You can’t be worse off in Worcester Prison—say that that’s the worst—than in this den.”

“No, no—but she would hear of it. I have told you so,” she added peevishly, “or you don’t know—you don’t see——”

“Sally,” said her sister-in-law, slowly and emphatically, “I’ve been a-thinking it all over.”

“Well?” said Sarah Eastbell.

“And if you’d like to go, I’ll not blab a single word against you, even if he kills me, and he’s often said he would. He mayn’t find you out, and if he does he’ll think twice about doing you an ill turn. He’s not so bad, you know, take him altogether. Go—run away—hook it,” exclaimed Mrs. Eastbell, with increasing excitement evidencing itself along with her slangy phraseology, “whilst there’s time!”

Sarah wavered, for she turned quickly to her sister-in-law.

"You—you mean this?"

"Yes."

"You will not tell Tom, or Tom's friends—you will let me pass from this place unwatched—you will give me time to get away?"

"Of course I will."

"I came here of my own free will, sir, not knowing where to go in my despair and fright," she said, turning to Reuben: "but, oh! if I could get away again! If you only knew that——"

Her hands fell helplessly to her side, and she went backwards step by step to the bedside again, where she sat down with a new horror on her countenance.

The door had opened, and Tom Eastbell, with his long great-coat buttoned round him, was standing in the doorway regarding them. Over his shoulder loomed the forbidding countenance of the man who had met Reuben at the entrance, which, by the jarring and clanging that echoed through the house, was evidently

being bolted and barred and locked with a mysterious precipitancy. Reuben Culwick was not greatly dismayed, but there came a strong suspicion to his mind that he was in danger.

## CHAPTER XVII.

## IN DANGER.

THE man who in his zeal had adventured into Potter's Court did not betray, by any change of feature, his sense of the danger which seemed hanging over him. It was not an enviable position, but his coolness did not desert him. He looked steadily towards the two men in the doorway, and calculated their strength and weight against his own, and the extra odds that might be lurking on the dark landing-place and staircase.

Had it not been for the clanging of bolts below, and for the careful locking up of the house, he would have been disposed to regard the arrival of Thomas Eastbell and his com-

panion in a friendly spirit, despite the scowls with which they favoured him, and the anxious faces of the women. He was standing by the fireplace, and he glanced down for any weapon of defence that might come in handy if the gentlemen in the house grew disputatious; but the fire-irons were missing, and there was only his own natural strength to rely upon, if necessary.

"Hanged if I didn't think so!" exclaimed Thomas Eastbell, *alias* Vizzobini, of the crown-ed-head patronage department. "So this is why you have been creeping about the Saxe-Gotha, is it? Well, what have I done that you come into my crib in this way? Now you've found me out, what have you got to say? What the blazes have you got to say?" he roared forth in a louder key.

"That you keep too big a fire for the time of year, and that it isn't good for your healths," said Reuben, in a quiet tone of voice; "I have been telling Miss Eastbell so."

"What's the fire to do with you? You don't send in the coals and coke to make

it up, do you? There ain't a law against a man having as much fire as he chooses, if he can pay for it. You ain't put yourself out of the way to come to Potter's Court to tell us that?"

"I have come to see your sister."

"Well, that's uncommon kind of you!" he answered ironically.

"Tom," said Sarah, at this juncture, "this is Mr. Culwick—young Mr. Culwick—our cousin. You have heard me speak of him. You must not attempt in any way to interfere with him."

"You shut up! Hasn't he interfered with me?" snarled forth her brother; "hasn't he been dodging after me for the last three days?"

"He has been trying to find me."

"What business has he with you?—why can't he mind his own business, and let you alone?" cried Tom. "What's this second-cousin chap to us? What good is he? What notice has he ever taken of us till now? Hang me! I don't believe he's a cousin at all, but a policeman trying to work up a

case against people more honest than himself."

"I don't ask you to believe anything," said Reuben.

"After telling me to-night that you'd come to see me perform, I shouldn't think you would! No, the cousin dodge won't do for me," he added; "I'm not likely to swallow that yarn. What's your game?"

"I came to help your sister."

"Oh! that's it—Eh?"

The interrogative was addressed to the man looking over his shoulder, who had touched his arm and whispered in his ear, keeping his eyes fixed upon Reuben meanwhile.

"My friend remarks," said Mr. Eastbell, with a smile upon his countenance as he addressed Reuben once more, "that if you have come to help the family, perhaps you will be kind enough to prove your words by doing the handsome to people out of luck."

"You mean give you money?"

"We are precious poor," said Tom.

"So am I."

"We are out of luck, and you are here to help us."

"To help Sarah Eastbell, if she will."

"To help all of us or none—we share and share alike in Potter's Court."

"Then, gentlemen, I am sorry to say that I can't help you."

"But you must," growled forth the man in the background, who had recently whispered to Tom Eastbell; "you've walked in without leave after the gal, and you'll pay your footing before you go."

An awful oath closed this assertion.

"I think not," said Reuben Culwick.

"Then you'll have to stop," cried the man.

"The house is locked up for the night, and we can't afford to part with you—can we, mate?"

"No, we can't," answered Thomas Eastbell.

"Am I to understand that I'm a prisoner?" inquired Reuben sternly.

"You're to understand nothing, but that you've come here of your own free-will, and it ain't convenient to unlock the house again to-night," said Tom. "We don't know what



you've come for—what you've seen to make a case of, or what story you may trump up tomorrow to lug innersent people off to prison."

"You've taken up your lodging, and you can't go without paying for it," said the other man; "that's the law, fair and straight, you know, in any court; so pay up, if you mean well."

"Ingenious," said Reuben, shrugging his broad shoulders, "but I have nothing to give away."

"There's men down-stairs who say you're a spy on them," said Tom, in further explanation, "and they're Irish, and soon riled. So help me," he added in a confidential tone, "if I would answer for your life if you stop here much longer. They're awful chaps, I swear!"

Reuben smiled incredulously.

"I am not afraid of them."

"Ask my sister. As you're dead nuts on her, p'raps you'll take her word.—Sally," he said, "will the Petersons stand as much of this man as I have?"

"They will not come up here!" cried Sarah.

"They're sitting on the stairs waiting," said Tom, "and they *will* know all about this fellow. They are as sure as I am that he's a detective!"

"You have told them so!" said Sarah indignantly.

"P'raps I have, and p'raps I haven't," answered her brother. "And now you and Soph just move out of here—we can't come to terms with women in the room. The gentleman will be much more reasonable when we are all men of business together. Do you hear?" he yelled, as a want of alacrity in responding to his summons disturbed the last fragment of self-possession that was left in him.

Mrs. Eastbell rose to comply with her husband's request, but Sarah darted to the window of the room and threw it open.

"What now?" exclaimed her brother, as the cold air rushed in, and Mrs. Eastbell, taken aback by it, began to cough herself to pieces.

"There's mischief meant," cried Sarah; "I shan't leave this window whilst Mr. Culwick re-

mains, and I will scream my heart out if you touch him!—This is a dreadful house, sir," she said to Reuben, "with dreadful men in it. Be on your guard!"

"Come back from that window!" roared Tom.

"I will do nothing of the kind," cried Sarah, standing there erect and defiant, "till Mr. Culwick is allowed to quit this place, I'll not move away."

"Don't you see how you're making your sister-in-law cough, you brute?" said Thomas Eastbell. "If we were the Forty Thieves you couldn't make more fuss. Why——"

He was sidling step by step towards his sister as he spoke, when Reuben Culwick crossed the room in one stride, and thrust him forcibly away before his panther-like spring could fasten on her. It was a bold move, assuming the offensive in this fashion, but Reuben had grown angry at restraint, and it was the time to act, or never. Thomas Eastbell, despite his athletic profession, was a slight man, with an undeve-

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loped physique, and no match for the strength of the honest young fellow who had confronted him thus unceremoniously. Reuben's thrust sent him staggering with violence against his friend, who, taken off his guard, received Tom's bullet-head between the eyes, and fell backwards into the passage, with Tom on the top of him.

The sudden change in the condition of affairs approximated so closely to burlesque that a short sharp laugh escaped our hero as the men tumbled over each other. Still it was a crisis; he had thrown down the gauntlet, and must face the result. The clear doorway suggested a temporary expedient, and he closed the door quickly, turned the key which was on the inner side, and set his foot against the lower portion of the wood-work.

"There'll be murder done now," said Mrs. Eastbell, wringing her hands. "Oh, you fool to come to this place! Call out you'll give 'em money, or they can have your watch—say something. They're coming up the stairs!"

“Who are they?” asked Reuben, sternly now.

Mrs. Eastbell did not answer, but Sarah  
whispered :

“Coiners !”

## CHAPTER XVIII.

## ON DEFENCE.

REUBEN began to consider his position with a greater degree of seriousness, although his courage did not in anyway desert him. That it would be a fight for life now, he did not doubt, for the house was full from roof to basement of desperate men, with whom life might be of little value in comparison with the secret of their nefarious trade. If he could disappear without any fuss, it would be better for the welfare of the community at Potter's Court; and he had set them all at defiance, and would betray them if allowed to leave the premises.

He could hear the trampling of heavy feet

upon the stairs, and the low oaths and curses of the men whom he had left on their backs on the landing-place, and then the door creaked and shook with the heavy pressure of shoulders from without.

Sarah Eastbell was as good as her word. Her watchful dark eyes had observed the door vibrating, and a scream of extraordinary shrillness and volume startled the echoes of Potter's Court, and welled forth into the narrow street beyond.

"Oh! don't, Sally—it's only their fun, perhaps," cried Mrs. Eastbell; but Sally, excited by the proximity of danger, screamed again with fifty-horse power, and then swept from the window-sill a whole collection of flower-pots that had held the geraniums and fuchsias of the last tenant, and which descended with a tremendous crash on to the paved footway below. The pressure against the door ceased, as though the people in the house had stopped to listen; the windows of other houses in Potter's Court began opening rapidly; there were voices shouting out innumerable questions;

there were three or four shrill whistles, and then the ominous crack of a rattle, followed by another in response, and at a little distance.

"You are safe," said Sarah; "the police are coming."

"You have brought it all upon us, Sally!" cried Mrs. Eastbell, bursting into tears; "it's all your wicked temper and wilfulness. We shall go to prison—everyone of us."

"Mr. Culwick will not say a word to add to any misery here, I'm sure," said Sarah, meaningly.

The court was full of noise now, amidst which were heard rough peremptory voices asking questions, and receiving a grand chorus of explanation; but in the house, and beyond the door which Reuben had locked, was the stillness of the dead. Presently the street-door below was being unfastened in response to solemn knocks without, and then the ponderous unmistakable boots of the metropolitan force were heard clamping up the stairs. Reuben unlocked the room-door, and Thomas Eastbell, white as a ghost, crawled in on his hands and



knees, took a harlequin's dive into bed, and drew the tattered coverlet to his chin. The burly figures of three policemen were in the room an instant or two afterwards—the representatives of the force never went singly into Potter's Court when a dispute was raging amongst its inhabitants.

"Now, then, what's the row?" said the principal spokesman, "who's been trying to throw the other out of window?"

"Who's been melting lead?" inquired another, whom the peculiar nature of the atmosphere had impressed as it had done Reuben at an earlier hour.

No one had been throwing another out of window, whined forth Mrs. Eastbell, no one had been melting lead or anything. They had had a little wrangle as it got late, and just as their cousin was a-going home, and the flower-pots somehow gave way and fell into the court, which frightened the gal at the window, who began to scream. The policeman who had first spoken, listened to this explanation with a stolid stare upon his countenance; the second official,

being of an inquisitive turn of mind, opened all the drawers and cupboards, and examined their contents ; the third man inspected Mr. Thomas Eastbell as he lay recumbent, and inconvenienced him by giving him the benefit of the glare from a bull's-eye lantern on his face.

"Come, that sham won't do, young feller," said he ; "is there any complaint to make?"

No one had any complaint to make.

"Has any one been robbed, or threatened, or maltreated?" asked the first policeman, looking hard at Reuben.

No one answered.

"Who are you?" asked the policeman abruptly of our hero.

"Oh ! I'm the cousin," answered Reuben.

"You've nothing to say?"

"Nothing."

"Are you going to stop here?"

"Thank you, no," said Reuben ; "I was just thinking of getting home. We have had a little dispute certainly, and Tom and I—this is my cousin Tom, who performs at the Saxe-Gotha—got to high words and a playful scramble—and that's all."

"Yes—that's all," asserted Tom with alacrity, "and it's a precious little to come into a man's house for—three of you too—and rummage over his things."

"What's your name?"

"Vizzobini."

"From the country?"

"From Rome."

"I should like to know where this smell of lead comes from," said the inquisitive policeman again.

Reuben had crossed to Sarah.

"Here is your chance still. Will you leave this place?"

"Not yet," she answered, "not till Tom's safe."

"Tom's a scoundrel."

"He is my brother."

"But when I am gone, they——"

"They will not hurt me," she said with a forced smile, "I shall not come to any harm. Go now, please."

"Shall I ever see you again?—or do you pass away from me, as from the poor old woman you left alone in St. Oswald's?"

It was a reproof, but he intended it.

"You will see me again soon," she answered with a strange look towards him.

"Good-bye, then."

"Good-bye."

Reuben went out of the room, and the policemen followed him down-stairs, and into the court, strewn with innumerable fragments of flower-pots, which were crunched beneath their heavy heels.

"Blest if you mightn't have smashed somebody with your larks," said the observant policeman, looking up at the window from which the avalanche had descended.

"It was rather rough play," answered Reuben.

"Have you been there before?" asked the first policeman.

"No."

"You'll not go there again, cousin or no cousin, if you have anything to lose."

"Which I have not."

"I don't think you're one of the lot," said the policeman, eyeing him closely, when they were

up the steps and under the gas-lamp, "but I shall remember you, my man."

"Thank you."

Thus Reuben Culwick, somewhat ungratefully, left the triumvirate who had arrived in good time to his rescue. But he could not explain, and it seemed the better policy to be silent, for Second-cousin Sarah's sake. She wished it—and it was she who had saved him from danger. He had to think again of the way to save her, now that he had become more than ever resolved to get her away from Potter's Court.

## CHAPTER XIX.

## ATONEMENT.

REUBEN CULWICK did not attempt in any way to account for his late hours to the inmates of Hope Lodge. He was the master of his own actions, which no one, he felt, had any right to criticise. Hence, with this impression on his mind, the deep reveries of Lucy Jennings, and the studious stares of her brother, who, when not busy with his fireworks, appeared to be taking him in far too intently, became a source of irritation to him.

It had impressed itself upon the Jennings's mind, brother and sister's, that he, Reuben Culwick, was not so steady as he used to be—that

he had come back from Worcester a changed man. He had been at the Saxe-Gotha Gardens more than once, and John Jennings knew that he was interested in a girl in a black and white cotton dress, for he had not only made inquiries concerning her, but had warned him not to tell Lucy. Then he was eccentric, and kept late hours; he had become reticent when people wanted him talkative; a portion of his bright cheery nature had suddenly vanished, and he had grown wondrously thoughtful, as men will do when their consciences are ill at ease.

Neither John nor Lucy Jennings thought that Reuben Culwick had his second-cousin on his mind, and that it was his own generous concern for her that had turned him grave of late days. And why Second-cousin Sarah should oppress his mind in this way, he could hardly understand, for she had seemed scarcely grateful for his interest, and in some respects to be opposed to it. He exercised no influence over her; she was on the wrong road, and no persuasions of his had power to turn her back. She was a relation certainly, but then so

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was Tom Eastbell, and the old woman in the almshouses of St. Oswald's. Was it her helplessness, hemmed round by the adverse circumstances of life, through which it seemed impossible to break? Was it the forlornness of her youth, and the good traits of character that seemed to fight hard in her for fair play? It was not a romantic interest, though there had been a certain amount of romance in the meetings and partings between them; she was only a "bit of a girl," and there was not the ghost of a tender sentiment inspiring him, he was certain. She had been so obstinate and self-willed at times, too, that he had felt disposed to shake her, but still there was an intense longing to save her, and a sad feeling almost of despair, at his own inability to accomplish it.

He took no one into his counsel; if he had small faith in himself, he had less in anybody else, and, for reasons which he will explain presently, he kept the story of his discovery of his cousin, and of the adventures which had followed it, a secret. He went his own course, and he waited and watched for Sarah Eastbell still; and



even Tots knew that there was something different in the little world they shared together, by his more constant absence from home, and by his leaving her to Aunt Lucy's care and guidance, which, however well carried out, was accompanied by more scoldings and lectures than even Tots remembered suffering from at any period anterior to this.

John Jennings was suffering also from the same cause. His sister Lucy's temper was certainly not improving; every day she was becoming harder and colder, more uncharitable and more suspicious, and thus the change in Reuben Culwick seemed to work its change on the household in its turn. John set down his sister's acerbity, and her bad habit of slamming the door behind her, to her consciousness that all was not well with his Saxe-Gotha Gardens account, and he essayed to render matters more cheerful by giving highly coloured versions of the position of affairs, which Lucy did not respond to, and probably did not believe in, judging by the stony apathy with which she listened to his statements. Reuben was the first to comment upon the change in Lucy Jen-

nings. He was quick enough to note her taciturnity and stolidity, although unaware that he had been extra grave and a trifle mysterious himself; and when it came to bringing in the breakfast tray without a word, setting it down with a bang that jarred on his nerves, and leaving the room without so much as a "good morning," he thought it was quite time to make a few inquiries on his own account.

"Is anything the matter, Lucy?" he asked at last, one morning.

"Anything the matter!" answered Lucy at once; "with you, do you mean?"

"No; with you?"

"I'm not very well, but I don't know that I am worse than usual. Why?"

"You don't seem quite so lively, that's all, said Reuben; "I was afraid you and John had had a little difference, and I was going to volunteer to act as mediator."

"Thank you," was the answer, "John and I understand each other very well without any mediation. We have not quarrelled—we never do quarrel."

"You haven't heard any bad news?"

"Not at present. We're waiting."

"Waiting for bad news! Well, Lucy," he added with one of his old laughs, "I would wait till it came before giving way."

Lucy saw her opportunity, and being a woman, dashed at it.

"It has come, though we don't know what it means."

"Eh—how's that?"

Lucy Jennings sat down suddenly in the chair nearest to her lodger, and burst forth with her catalogue of wrongs, making amends for all past reserve in one breath.

"It has come to you. You're not the man you have been. You keep away from home too much—you have been seen at low places of amusement—you're going wrong—you—you—you never tell us anything!" cried Lucy passionately.

"Yes, I have been seen at low places of amusement," said Reuben quietly, "and my hours of return to Hope Lodge are somewhat irregular at present. And so I am going wrong, Lucy?"

"You are not doing what is right."

"That's frank," said Reuben drily.

"You must be ashamed of something, or you would tell us," said this plain-speaking young woman; "there's always a bad reason for hustling the truth into a corner, and hiding your life away from those who are anxious about it."

"You are very kind to be anxious, but——"

"I never said I was anxious," cried Lucy, "only that there were those whom you were disturbing by your change of life—by your strange ways. You are neglecting your work—there's that paper been lying on your desk untouched for the last three days—you don't go to the office, because letters from the *Trumpet* come to you. I know the seal! John says you're often at the Saxe-Gotha—that last night you were asking the waiter why Vizzobini had given up performing—and altogether you're restless, ill at ease, and unhappy."

"You will excuse me, Lucy," he said, more gravely and coldly than he was in the habit of addressing her, "but is it your place to tell me

of it, even in this irrelevant and insane fashion?"

"If no one else will—yes," cried Lucy stoutly; "I never saw anyone going wrong—by ever so little—but what I felt it my place, my duty, to try and set the sinner right again."

"Yes, but you jump too rapidly at conclusions, after the habit of enthusiasts. I'm not a sinner—that is, no more of a miserable specimen than I was three weeks ago."

"Why did you ask John about the girl in the striped dress, at the Saxe-Gotha——"

"Ah, the rascal has turned king's evidence, then!" cried our hero.

"Why did you ask him not to tell me?—why are you always at the gardens?—why had you the effrontery," she cried, with eyes ablaze now, "to ask that wretched, miserable girl to call here for you?"

"WHAT!" shouted Reuben, so forcibly that even Lucy was unprepared for his excitement, and jumped back in her chair some distance from him.

"What do you mean?" he continued, "who has been here? Speak out—don't glare at me,

you suspicious, heartless, disagreeable woman !  
What girl called here for me ?”

Lucy was very pale, but she held her ground against his rage, though she had never been a witness to it before. He had been always a pleasant man till this day, but now he was full of passion and, perhaps, hate of her. She could understand more clearly now why his quarrel with his father had been a bitter one.

“It was a girl in a *striped cotton dress*,” said Lucy with emphasis.

“Somewhat tall and thin, with great black eyes?”

“I didn’t notice her eyes,” said Lucy aggravatingly ; “she was a pert, insolent, miserably-clad woman. She would not answer any of my questions, save that you had told her to call, and she grew impertinent at last.”

“You sent her away ?”

“Yes.”

“You did not tell her that I should be home soon—ask her to call again—anything ?”

“She said that she would never come again.”

“Because of your hardness and harshness ?”

"Did you expect me to be civil to her?"

"Why not?"

"She carried effrontery and desperation in her face."

"It's a lie!" shouted Reuben Culwick; "you don't know what you are doing, what you have done, in your heartlessness."

"If I have stopped her coming, if I——"

"Don't say any more," cried Reuben, "for I can't listen to you. There was a soul to be saved, and you have wrecked it?"

"No," said Lucy, growing paler still, "you don't mean——"

"I mean that that girl is my cousin, for whom you tried to obtain an honest place in life," he replied, "for whose salvation I have been struggling after my useless fashion."

"She is at Worcester."

"She left Worcester—there was a charge against her, she could not meet it, or account for it, and she ran away from home," said Reuben. "It was a false step, for she trusted a vagabond brother, and lost faith in herself; but she lived on in hope, for all

that, and she kept strong amidst it all."

"And then?"

"And then I found her in London, and tried to save her from the evil that was surrounding her. She saved my life, perhaps, then, and rendered me for ever her debtor. When there was a chance for her, she was to come here. She came," he said fiercely, "and you sent her away. How will you, with all your narrow views of charity, and God's mercy, and God's vengeance, answer for it, if you have cut from her the last thread which led her to a better life?"

Lucy Jennings was cowed by his reproaches, by his vehemence. Suspicious, awfully suspicious, as she was, she was still a religious woman, and the horror of having cast back a stubborn, wilful nature on itself rose before her even in more terrible colours than he had painted it.

"Why—why didn't you tell me?" she gasped forth, "why didn't you trust me?"

"You were not to be trusted," said Reuben, remorselessly; "you would have believed the



worst of her, until I could have proved how merciless you were. You are a woman, and you judge your sex as women will!"

"I will find her," said Lucy, very meekly now, "I will bring her back."

"It is impossible."

"I will tell her that I was wrong in my judgment, I will ask her pardon. You must not charge the loss of this girl to me."

"She will never return."

"Where did you see her last?"

"In Potter's Court."

"I know it—in the Walworth Road," said Lucy; "it is part of my mission to go amongst the people there. What is the number of the house?"

"Two."

"Where the Petersons live—the Irish people. I will go at once—don't judge me too harshly, till I have made amends for my mistake," she pleaded.

"It is too late," said Reuben, gloomily, "the house was empty two days since. There were coiners in it, and the suspicion that I might be

tray them, or that the police were on the scent, led them to leave the premises."

"I will find them," said Lucy; "I am known. People trust me there, who know me better than you do," she added, almost disdainfully again.

"Why should they trust you?" asked Reuben.

"Because they understand me, because in the midst of crime and suffering I have been often at my best, and tried to do my best. Because I have been less suspicious and more in earnest there. I am not a good woman," she said, with a sudden abjectness once more predominant, "but God knows that I have tried hard to be good, and to forget self at times, amidst the misery I have moved in. I will find her, or " (with a hard expression on her countenance) "I will never come back again."

"That is an unwise threat, and is not consistent with your duty to your brother."

"I have said it," answered Lucy; "I never break my word."

Lucy Jennings walked out of the room with her hands rigidly clasped together; in a few minutes afterwards she had passed out of the house.

“Have I been too hard with her?” thought Reuben, looking after her, “have I driven her from home? Is she quite right in her head, I wonder?”

Lucy Jennings was not quite right in that department, possibly, but she knew what she was about, and she was a woman of a strong determination. She had made a mistake, and her pride was abased. There was an atonement to make, and a woman to save, and in the midst of all the contrarities of her singular character, a heart somewhat stony had been set in the right place. Lucy Jennings was not far wrong in her self-estimate—it was only amidst much privation, crime, and misery that she was at her best.

It was late, and when John Jennings and Reuben Culwick had taken counsel together, and had arrived at the conclusion that she would not return that night—when Tots, with the in-

consistency of childhood, had begun to fret after her hard custodian—Lucy, stiff-backed and grim, came up the front garden with a tall girl, who walked with difficulty, resting on her arm.

“Here’s your Second-cousin Sarah,” she said to Reuben, in her old jerky manner, as the two women came into the house.

## CHAPTER XX.

## THE RETURN.

REUBEN CULWICK rose to greet his second-cousin, and to introduce her to John Jennings, who was filling in some Roman candle cases for Mr. Splud's benefit, which was to take place in a fortnight's time at the Saxe-Gotha, after which a faithful settlement of accounts was solemnly promised to all those whom it might concern, and it concerned Mr. Jennings very much indeed.

"I am glad that you have come," said Reuben heartily.—"John" (to the firework-maker), "this is my Second-cousin Sarah."

"How d'ye do, marm?" said Mr. Jennings, with a solemn bow.

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Sarah Eastbell was very like Sarah Eastbell's ghost, as she looked from one to another, and tried hard to raise a smile, without success.

"Can't you find the girl a seat, instead of staring at her?" said Lucy sharply to her brother, who immediately tendered her his own chair, and began to put away his fireworks.

"You have been ill?" said Reuben to his cousin, as she sat down wearily; "how's that?"

"Not ill exactly. A little weak, perhaps," answered Sarah; "I shall be better in a minute."

"I am very glad that you have found her, Lucy," said Reuben to Miss Jennings, who was untying her bonnet-strings in a rather violent manner; "you will let me thank you for all the trouble you have taken?"

Lucy shook her head emphatically.

"I never care for people's thanks," she answered.

"She has been very good to me," Sarah Eastbell murmured; "I made a mistake when I thought her very hard—but my life's been pretty well all mistakes, I think."

"There's plenty of time before you," said Reuben; "why, life is only just commencing—you're not an old fellow like me, who has worn out life and all his hopes in it."

"Don't mind him," said Lucy Jennings, as the great dark eyes were upturned to Reuben with much wonder in them; "he talks like that at times, and for no reason."

"Perhaps it's a way I have," said Reuben. "And now, how did Miss Jennings find you?"

"You are not going to worry her into a long statement to-night," said Lucy, interfering; "can't you see she is ill?"

"The young woman would like a drop of whiskey, perhaps," said John, suddenly producing the bottle from the cupboard in which he had put away his Roman candles.

"You can't think of anything but whiskey," cried his sister acrimoniously; "lock your poison up and be quiet."

"Mr. Reuben, perhaps you——"

"No, thank you, John."

"Well, as it is out, perhaps a thimbleful will

not do me any harm," he said, as though some invisible being had pressed him very earnestly not to put it away without tasting it. He filled a small glass, and drank off its contents, and Sarah Eastbell turned to Reuben.

"I don't want any money," she said, with sudden alacrity.

"Well, I haven't asked you to take any," he answered laughingly.

"She wants rest," muttered Lucy Jennings.

"I don't want rest—only a few hours, that is," said Sarah, correcting herself, "and then I hope to set off."

"Set off!" repeated Reuben, "where?"

"To Worcester," answered Sarah. "I have been thinking of what you said to me at Potter's Court, and when Tom and his wife left me in the lurch—they went away in the night whilst I was asleep, as if they had grown suddenly afraid of me—I came to this place, and—"

"And I sent you away," added Lucy, as Sarah Eastbell paused. "That was one of my mistakes. We all make them. Go on."



"I wanted you to take me down to Worcester, then," she said to Reuben, "to stand by me, as you promised that you would, being a good man."

"My dear girl, I am a very bad man. Ask Lucy." Miss Jennings frowned, and would not see the joke.

"And if you will take me to-morrow—early—I should like it," she continued, speaking with some amount of difficulty; "I can't do very well without you, sir, or else I would. Besides——"

"Go on."

"Besides, I want you to have the five pounds."

"What five pounds?" asked Reuben; "that I gave your grandmother when——"

"Oh, no—not that," said Sarah, "but to pay that one back, part of which we were obliged to spend. There's five pounds reward offered for me, you know, and you must claim that, for it's through you I'm giving myself up. I shall say you have caught me, and——"

"Here—hold hard—that will do—no more of your highly-coloured fictions, Cousin Sarah; it's time you gave *them* up, at any rate," he cried; "and as for the blood-money, upon my honour, you turn me to gooseflesh at the thought of it!"

"Why shouldn't you have the money as well as anybody else?" said Sarah reflectively.

"Suppose we argue the case in the morning?"

"As we go to Worcester?" said Sarah—"very well. This good woman who traced me to-day thinks it would be right to tell the truth, but, oh! I can't tell grandmother. You will break it to her, in your best way, won't you?"

"Well, yes."

"And I may rest here to-night?" (turning to Lucy Jennings again).

"You will share my bed," said Lucy.

"And in the morning——"

"'Sufficient for the day is the evil thereof,'" quoted Lucy solemnly, "and the evil thoughts, the evil judgment born of this day, we will keep

for the better days to come, with God to help us in the effort."

She looked at Reuben, as if he had had a share in the evil thoughts and judgment of that day, and was not wholly blameless; and then passed from the room to a little kitchen beyond, where she was heard striking matches so energetically that her brother stood upon tiptoe, and peered through the glass door which divided them.

"Be careful, Lucy," he called out, "there's a tub of preparation under the dresser, and you might blow us all up in a minute."

"Didn't I say next time you put your rubbish here, instead of in the powder-shed, I'd throw it into the garden?" cried Lucy.

"You certainly mentioned something of the kind, but as it was late, I thought—By George, she's done it!"

The opening of an outer door, and the clattering of something heavy along the gravel path beyond, was significant of Lucy's being as good as her word; and John Jennings, with his

mouth half-way open, listened for awhile, and then moved towards the kitchen.

"As it may rain in the night, I think I'll put it under shelter, if you'll excuse me for a moment," he said with great politeness, as he withdrew.

Reuben turned to his second-cousin.

"You are not well, Sarah. How have you been living since we met last?"

"I have been starving almost," said Sarah; "Tom deserted me. He was afraid of me, and ran away, after that night."

"When you saved my life, perhaps."

"Oh, not so bad as that," said Sarah; "Tom would not have hurt you, he's only talk! But that coining gang down-stairs—I was afraid of them."

She shivered at what might have happened, Reuben thought, until she kept on shivering, and put one thin hand suddenly to her chin, to stop her teeth from chattering.

"You are cold."

"A little cold—it's the damp cellar, where a

poor old woman let me rest last night, that's done it. I shall be better to-morrow."

"You must have food."

Sarah Eastbell turned pale at the suggestion.

"Don't talk of food, please. That good friend of yours made me have something to eat and drink a little while ago, and it has nearly killed me. How good she is, sir!"

"Yes, I begin to think so," muttered Reuben.

"If you knew how they love her down the dark streets where such as I live!"

"Used to live," said Reuben, correcting her: "that's all gone by now."

"This is beginning again—isn't it?"

"Yes—a new beginning!"

"Opening with a prison, that's the worst of it," said Sarah; "for they won't believe me, it isn't likely. And then afterwards—and it's not long for the first offence, I have heard Tom say—there's life again at St. Oswald's, if the committee will let me go to grandmother."

"And then Tom again, sneaking round for

money, when he thinks that you have any."

"Poor Tom!" said Sarah, to our hero's surprise, "he only came when he was hard up. For he has a high spirit, Mr. Reuben."

"Very. I am afraid that it is high enough to hang him presently. There, don't look angry; it's only my private opinion, and he's not worth defending. Hasn't he run away from you?—thank Heaven!"

"He couldn't trust me," she said despondently, "not even Tom!" she cried.

"Haven't I trusted you—always?"

The girl looked at him strangely.

"Ah! I shall be never able to understand you, sir. And yet I have tried hard too."

"Well—do you trust me?"

"God bless you!—yes."

She would have seized his hands and raised them to her lips in a spasmodic burst of gratitude, but he evaded the compliment, and began walking up and down the little room.

"You must remember that we are relations, Sarah—that you have a claim upon me," he said lightly; "it's no use looking at this seriously

I'm a comic sort of man—fond of my joke, and with an objection to sentiment."

"You tell a great many stories, like me," said his cousin sadly; "I suppose that it is in the family, and we can't help it."

"If you were not looking so woe-begone, I should set that down for 'chaff,'" said Reuben, pausing.

"Just now you said you were a bad man. As if I didn't know better than that!"

"Ah! you are a knowing young woman."

"Grandmother told me all about you and your father."

"What do you know about my father?"

"That you and he didn't agree very well, though you were both excellent men."

"It's an excellent world when you thoroughly know it," said Reuben; "but then we never thoroughly know it, I am afraid."

Lucy entered at this juncture, with a basin of gruel.

"How you two have been talking! Didn't the doctor tell you to keep quiet, Saul?" said she.

"I have so much to say now," replied Sarah.

"What do you mean by the doctor?" asked Reuben.

"She fainted away in the street, and I took her to the nearest doctor's," Lucy explained.

"I am used to fainting—it's weakness caused by growing too fast, they say," said Sarah.

"Yes—I remember; you do faint," said Reuben with a laugh, but the big dark eyes only regarded him gravely. That was the second joke of his which had fallen flatly that evening.

"Bid your cousin good night," said Lucy, "and we'll go up-stairs."

"And in the morning we must leave early, please," said Sarah.

"In the morning we will arrange that," Reuben replied.

"Thank you. Good night, sir."

"You need not 'sir' me quite so much, cousin," said Reuben; "it's a deferential method of address that makes me blush—and



blushing is not good for me. Good night, Sarah. Good night, Lucy."

"I shall be down again presently," said Lucy meaningly.

## CHAPTER XXI.

## WARNINGS.

REUBEN took this last remark of Lucy's as a hint to remain, and went into the garden to see what had become of John Jennings. He found that gentleman reclining in an angle of one of the most tumble-down summer-houses that had been ever constructed, placidly smoking his long pipe, apart from the turmoil of Hope Lodge.

"I have been looking for you, John," Reuben said as he took a seat near him.

"How is she now?" asked John.

"She is very weak and low, but a night's rest will do her good."

"I have known twenty nights' rest only make her worse."

"Of whom are you speaking?"

"Lucy."

"Oh!—Lucy."

"If she was only a little bit more patient—if she took things easily and smoothly—what a difference it would make! She has upset half that 'preparation,' Mr. Reuben."

"You should not have kept it in the kitchen," said Reuben, siding with Lucy for once.

"Who would have thought of her lighting a fire at this time of night?—but then that poor girl was ordered gruel, certainly. Will you have some whiskey?"

"What—have you brought the bottle out here?"

"No—but I can soon fetch it. So far as I am concerned, I limit myself strictly to one glass after supper—unless I have a friend with me—and yet Lucy says I'm a fuddler."

"Lucy is a trifle hasty, that's all," said Reuben, "but I'll never say a word against that brave woman 'again—never in all my life, John, if I can help it. She's a sister to be proud of."

"Ah! and she'd make a good wife too," said John mildly and suggestively.

"That she would."

"A very good wife. I should be glad to see her married to a respectable young man."

"Yes—or an elder of her chapel—or the minister—or somebody that's very good to match. So should I."

"Ahem!—would you indeed?"

John Jennings was quietly surprised. It was one of his idiosyncrasies to consider that Reuben was secretly fond of his sister. This idea was constantly receiving a severe shock, which, however, he recovered from speedily.

"And now, John, to business."

"Business—what business?" asked John.

"How much ready money can you lend me till next Saturday, when the 'screw' from the *Trumpet* turns up?"

"Ready money, did you say? Bless my heart!" exclaimed John, "I haven't seen any for weeks."

"That's awkward. I'm going to Worcester to-morrow with my cousin."

"There's a great-coat of mine, I shan't want till the Winter, Mr. Reuben—and there's six silver tea-spoons up-stairs," he added, "and you are very welcome to the eight-day clock, which they'll always lend five shillings on—and there's——"

Reuben Culwick's hand fell like a thunderclap on John Jennings's shoulder, and startled the pipe from his mouth to the ground, where it shivered into fifty pieces.

"I thought as much, you secretive old tortoise," cried Reuben ; "you're hard up, and keeping it to yourself, and I can only get at the truth in this way. Now how much can I lend you?—for it's no use going on like this any longer."

"Then you're not hard up?"

"I'm as rich as a Jew. I have got an account at the Lambeth Savings Bank—I am positively rolling in wealth. What shall it be? A hundred thousand pounds till I see you again, or three or four sovereigns till the Saxe-Gotha stumps up?"

John Jennings was silent for awhile, although

he sat and sniffed at the night air in a curious and excitable way. Presently he put his arm before his eyes with a faint "excuse me," and finally said, in a low nervous treble,

"It's like you, Mr. Reuben. You are always thoughtful of us, when I try hard not to think. Times *are* slackish, and I'm a baby in them. I know I am, but I can't very well help it. If three pounds will not inconvenience you just now, it will be something like a God-send."

"Here they are."

"I get plenty of credit in my own particular business, of course, for I am a well-known man," said John, after thanking his lodger heartily, and stowing the sovereigns away in his pocket, "but Lucy *will* pay for everything for the house. It's a good habit too—I don't blame her in the least."

"No—I wouldn't."

"Mr. Splud's benefit will fetch me straight again; I am the first man he will pay, he says."

"That's kind of him, if he means it."

"Splud's a very well-meaning man," asserted Mr. Jennings.

"And keeps on ordering fireworks—eh, John?"

"He has given me an excellent order for his benefit," said John, cheerfully; "and he tells me that he has sold a heap of tickets."

"Then I would ask for my money before the fireworks are let off."

"Oh! I couldn't do that," said John, "that—that would only lead to words, and hurt the man's feelings. He will pay—depend upon it, Mr. Reuben, that he will pay me every farthing."

The figure of Lucy Jennings emerged from the shadows, and came towards them.

"What have you two men to arrange so confidentially, that you get away from the house?" said Lucy, querulously, as she advanced.

"I came here for coolness," said John in reply, and Reuben Culwick did not offer any reason for his change of locality.

"I suppose you had something to say that you did not wish me to hear," said Lucy; "you need not trouble me with excuses, John, I know what they are worth."

"How is Sarah Eastbell now?" asked Reuben Culwick, by way of diversion.

"I have left her trying to sleep, but she will fail."

"A good night's rest is necessary before her journey."

"To Worcester, you mean?" said Lucy.

"Yes; I shall take her down to Worcester to-morrow. I think that is the best and wisest step, and that it will be easy to get her off when the facts are clearly stated."

"You don't see that she is going to be ill."

"Ill!—did the doctor say so?"

"He said she was very weak, and that I must be careful of her."

"What is the matter with her?"

"She has undergone great mental excitement, and endured much privation," said Lucy, "and it is an utter break-down."

"I don't see it," cried Reuben.

"We will wait till to-morrow. I thought that I would warn you to-night—as you are so very fond of this cousin—that you cannot



go to Worcester yet awhile," said Lucy.

"'As I am so very fond of this cousin,'" quoted Reuben—"poor second-cousin, with only my immense affection to rely upon at the turning-point of her miserable existence!"

"She can rely on her God," said Lucy.

"I wouldn't, Lucy—I really wouldn't tonight go on in this kind of way," pleaded her feeble brother.

"She can rely on you, too, Lucy, unless your interest in her has died out with your rescue," said Reuben.

"We shall see," said Lucy evasively.

## CHAPTER XXII.

## ALL THE NEWS.

MISS JENNINGS was right in her judgment. Sarah Eastbell did not go to Worcester the next day—did not remember her promise to accompany her cousin Reuben—did not know even the man with the big beard who leant over the bedside and called her by her name.

The crisis had come, and Sarah Eastbell had a battle to fight with brain-fever, or with a strange delirium which was, akin to it. When she came back to herself, she lay as powerless as Grandmother Eastbell at St. Oswald's, of whom she first thought, along

with the fleeting fancy that she was in one of the rooms of the almshouses, and that the old woman was not far away. A fortnight had passed then, and the face of the nurse had almost died out of her memory.

"How—is grandmother?" she asked with difficulty, pausing at each word.

"She is well."

"Will — you — tell her — that — I'm — better, please?"

"Yes."

Sarah Eastbell remained satisfied with the promise, and was silent for awhile. She slept a great deal that day and the next, and ate but little, and it was doubtful whether the complete prostration which followed would not terminate the odd life of Second-cousin Sarah.

The woman who attended upon her, and who she began to recollect was the firework-maker's sister, was kinder than she had ever been, and watched her with great gravity of interest as she hovered on the border-land of life and death.

Lucy talked to her also with a strange earn-

estness of those divine truths which are not to be dwelt upon in the pages of a story-book, and Sarah Eastbell listened with reverence.

"You think I am going to die?" she said once.

Miss Jennings never evaded a fact, but she was more considerate than it was her habit to be when she replied,

"I would be prepared, at all events."

"I'm not afraid," said Sarah Eastbell; "I have not done any one harm, and this life is not worth stopping in—is it?"

"I don't know," answered Lucy; "life's a mystery, Sarah."

"You don't value it, I think."

"If I could change places with you, I would."

"And yet you have a brother to look after, just as I have my grandmother," said Sarah.

"Oh, poor grandmamma! I wonder how you are, and if you think of me at times."

"You will know all about her soon. Your cousin Reuben returns to-morrow."

"Has he been there?"

"Yes."

"What a good man he is!" exclaimed Sarah; "it isn't like men, I fancy, to think of other people so much as he does."

"He is strange."

"I said he was good," said Sarah persistently.

"I hope he is," answered Lucy Jennings.

"Oh, I'm sure he is," cried the invalid with enthusiasm. "I wish that I could be suddenly very beautiful and very rich."

"It is not a good wish," said Lucy; "but why?"

"I would marry Cousin Reuben."

"You lying there, and talking of marriage!"

"If I died he would have my money; if I lived I would try—oh, so hard!—to make him happy."

"You're not fit for him, and never will be," said Lucy, more snappish than she had been hitherto; "and this is very foolish talk."

"What is foolish talk?" said a deep voice without the door; and both women coloured, and the elder one rose from her chair in her surprise. "May I come in and see the invalid?"

"He is back a day before his time," said Lucy; "may he come in?" she said to Sarah.

"Yes, to be sure," answered the sick girl.

Reuben Culwick advanced on tiptoe into the room, and walked to the bedside of his cousin, whose face brightened at the sight of him.

She was very weak, and could not reach her hand towards him, but there was a faint smile of welcome on her wan face. There was a great contrast between the vigorous ruddy health of the man fresh from the country, and this fading, fluttering life before him.

Reuben Culwick regarded the invalid intently behind the smile with which he masked the shock that her weakness gave him. He had been compelled to leave London to report on a stormy election in the country, and he had hardly expected to find her strong and well, though he had been more sanguine of ultimate results than he was in that moment of his return.

"Well, Sarah—better, I hope?" he said in the cheeriest voice which he could assume.

Sarah smiled faintly, and shook her head.

"Oh, yes, you are," said Reuben confidently; "you have got your wits back, although you have been talking foolishly to Lucy. May I inquire the subject of conversation?"

"No, you mayn't," answered Lucy.

"I will tell you to-morrow, if I am worse," said Sarah; "to-day you have news for me."

"To be sure I have. What a blockhead I am!"

"Is it good news?"

"Do you think I would bring bad news all the way from Worcester?" he said laughing—"that I wouldn't have left it behind me, or dropped it out of window before reaching Hope Lodge?"

"Go on, please," said Sarah anxiously.

"I went across country, after writing my article for the *Trumpet*—by the way, the *Trumpet* is getting on in the world, Lucy, and there are signs in the air of an increase of wage for R. C.—and reached Worcester yesterday afternoon."

"And saw grandmother?"

"Who was as lively as a cricket. By George,

if she wasn't toddling about the courtyard, and bullying Mother Muggeridge for not putting her kettle on to boil!"

"Who had dressed her, then?"

"Miss Holland, I hear."

"That is another friend I had almost forgotten," said Sarah. "Well?"

"Well—I told her that you were staying at Hope Lodge with me and the Jenningses, for change of air—that you had not been very well, but that I should bring you down to Worcester shortly."

"You should not have said that," said Sarah; "and yet I should like to be taken to Worcester if I die," she added thoughtfully.

"But you are not going to die," said Reuben quickly; "don't get that into your head, for Heaven's sake!"

"For Heaven's sake it may be as well to think of it a little," said Lucy Jennings, gravely.

Reuben Culwick did not dispute the assertion, but he moved about the room uneasily, as if disposed to do so. Suddenly he stopped.

"Yes, you are right, Lucy," he said, "Sarah



is a brave little woman, who will not fret herself to death over the worst, and who will get strong if she can."

"What do you call the worst?" asked Lucy.

"I'll tell you some other time—this is not a place for argument," answered Reuben, evasively; "besides, I haven't quite done with my news yet. Sarah, do you remember that bad sovereign Tom asked you to change at the grocer's for him?"

"Ah! yes."

"Well, I have been to the grocer's—I have stated the matter with lucidity and eloquence—I have appealed to the grocer's feelings—I have made him shed tears over his own sugar; and he says that rather than prosecute after my gentlemanly explanation, he'll see the authorities at the—Ahem! how very warm it is to-day, Lucy!"

"Mr. Giles does not think I tried to pass bad money, now?" cried Sarah.

"Not a bit of it. And after my statement, Sarah, I went round to the police-station, and

threatened everybody, from the Chancellor of the Exchequer to the inspector on duty, with libel, if they did not take down their absurd bills about you. I told them that the grocer had discovered his mistake in making the charge—that he withdrew it—that it was even a splendid sovereign, considering of what stuff it was composed—and the inspector made a handsome apology, and asked to shake hands with me.”

“I don’t see the necessity for this gross exaggeration,” said Lucy, severely.

“But I do. Why, Second-cousin Sarah’s laughing, almost. Aren’t you?”

“I am very grateful for the trouble you have taken,” said Sarah, “and I feel very, very happy now.”

“Then I’ll leave you with those sensations to get strong upon.”

Lucy followed him from the room.

“You are in high spirits to-day, Mr. Reuben,” she said; “is there any reason for it?”

“Only that I am at home again—that the *Penny Trumpet* is blowing itself into public favour,

and knowing people say it's my doing—that all's well everywhere."

"Even there?" asked Lucy, indicating by a gesture the room which she had quitted.

"Yes, I hope so."

"I think she will die."

"I'll not believe it."

"It is best for her that she should, rather than face the cruel world again."

"The world may change for her—we have helped to change it in our little way already," said Reuben.

"You have gone a strange way to work, at any rate."

"Ah! you don't admire my style, that is all."

"You should keep your flippant style of narrative for the novel you can't sell."

"Now, confound it, Lucy——"

But Lucy had gone back into the room after that extremely ill-natured remark, without waiting for Reuben Culwick's protest.

Reuben went into his own apartment, and walked up and down with his hands in his pockets, and his hat on the back of his head.

"What an ill-tempered, aggravating, sharp-tongued, good-hearted Christian porcupine that woman is!" he muttered. "For the novel that I can't sell, indeed!—that is the unkindest cut of all. Something must be wrong downstairs, or Sarah has tired her too much, or Tots has been up to her larks whilst I have been away. Now where's my little fairy, who brightens up this firework establishment, and never gives a disappointed man a hard word? What have they done with Tots to-day, I wonder?"

He went downstairs, where was John Jennings, up to his eyes in powder, and coloured fire, and "lengths," the picture of a busy man.

"Well, weren't they glad to see you?" exclaimed John, without leaving off his work.

"Glad to see me—they have been laughing their heads off, especially Lucy. What is all this work?—for Splud?"

"Yes."

"Hasn't his benefit come off, then?"

"Oh! yes, with immense success. This is for a repetition fête. The big devices and the fiery pigeon business were very much admired."

"And you got your money?"

"What a man you are, Mr. Reuben, to think about money!" said John, with a cracked little laugh. "I have some of it."

"How much?"

"He paid me seven pounds off the account, and he will settle for the lot presently. And that reminds me I owe you——"

"We'll talk of that in a day or two," said Reuben, impatiently. "Where's Tots?"

"Tot's—why, upstairs."

"I haven't seen her."

"She doesn't go into the back-room, for fear of disturbing your cousin. But she plays in your apartments, and Lucy looks in, and makes sure that she is not up to mischief."

"She is not in my room," said Reuben, turning somewhat pale at the mere possibility of a new trouble approaching him.

"Perhaps she is in mine."

"Go and see," said Reuben, peremptorily.

"Certainly," said John Jennings, "and I'll bring her down with me. Keep an eye on the shop, please; and you'll find some whiskey in

the cupboard, if you would like a little refreshment after your long journey."

Reuben did not answer. When John Jennings had gone, he, without any regard to the business interests, took a turn round the back-garden, then walked to the front of the house, and stood looking up and down the street with grave intentness. Presently John and his sister came out together, white and scared, and joined him on the pavement.

"She's gone! By Heaven, you have lost her!" he exclaimed.

"It's—it's very strange," said John, "but we can't find her anywhere."

## CHAPTER XXIII.

## AN UNEXPECTED VISITOR.

REUBEN CULWICK did not wait to hear any more, but ran at his utmost speed to the end of the street, in the hope of overtaking the little feet which he thought might have strayed in the direction of the market-gardens, where he had been accustomed to take her. But there was no sign of his adopted girl, and we may say at once that Reuben never saw her in Hope Street again. As suddenly as she had crossed his life, bettering and brightening it as by a strange influence for good, so suddenly did she pass away, leaving not a trace behind by which to follow her.

When he came back to Hope Lodge, baffled and heart-sick, when to all the inquiries which he made there was only one answer returned, that no one had seen poor Tots, the stern consciousness came to him that he had lost her—that the little daughter, friend, companion, would never again be as sunshine to his home. He did not betray his thoughts; he went on with his search; he expressed a confidence in her discovery that he did not realise. He “billed” every dead wall in Camberwell with his “Rewards,” he gave all the information that he had to impart to the police, he attended at the police-court to state her case before a magistrate, and to get the facts into the newspapers, but Tots returned not, and every effort was in vain. One or two scraps of information, real or false, came to the front to bewilder him, but there was no clue obtained. A woman in the street had seen a well-dressed gentleman stooping and talking to a little golden-haired child in the Camberwell Road, and on her asking what was the matter, she remembered the gentleman saying that the little



girl had strayed from home, but he was going to take her back again, as the child had told him where she lived ; but whether this was Tots or not it was impossible to prove, and the woman begged so hard for remuneration for coming to Hope Lodge, that Reuben believed she had invented the story.

In three weeks' time Reuben had learned to despair. He did not know how much he had loved the child till the house was destitute of her presence, and the little chair stood empty in the corner, and he could only look at it through his tears. Sometimes he wished that she had died, and that he had seen her buried, rather than have lost her thus, and be left to wonder where she was, and in whose hands. He became a grave man, who did not care for intrusion on his thoughts, and who resented it with bitterness. He sat in his room and brooded on the mystery ; he left his desk unopened for days together ; he tried to read, and failed, and when a strange stroke of good luck—in its little way—came to him, he took it grimly as a man whose spirits misfortune

had crushed out. The novel which had drifted into many hands had found a patron at last, and the sum of twenty-five pounds was offered for it, the publisher taking on himself all risk. It was not a large sum, but it was more than Reuben had calculated upon, possibly more than he had been in possession of since his quarrel with his father, more than of late days he had thought the book worth. He accepted the terms, and pocketed his money, which did not make his heart lighter; he had rather have seen Tots back than his first novel in all the glory of print and paper, and that is saying an immense deal for this young man's love for the child.

Three weeks had passed we repeat, and they were like three years to Reuben Culwick. His second-cousin was getting well then, although coming back to strength by slow degrees; and he was glad of that, if he showed but little sign of rejoicing in those dull days. The loss of one *protégée* appeared to have weakened his interest in another, although he was always kind to Sarah Eastbell. John Jennings and his

sister he had not forgiven in his heart; he attributed the loss of Tots to their want of ordinary care, and when on one occasion Lucy would have sermonised upon his trouble, he turned on her with words of acrimony which she never afterwards forgot. In her own way she was sorry for the child's loss too; but he did not believe it, and he told her that she had never liked her, and was glad she was gone, and that at all events he would not have any homily or sympathy from her.

The three weeks had turned, and the fourth week had commenced with work on the *Trumpet* that there was no setting aside—which was all the better for Reuben at that time, and took him out of himself, when Sarah Eastbell found strength to walk downstairs, supported by Miss Jennings on one side, and by Reuben on the other. The two who had rescued Sarah from danger had each a share in her first great step towards convalescence. Reuben had been anxious to place his own room at her disposal, but Lucy Jennings had interfered at once.

“No, that won't do,” she had said; “she

must keep with me and John, until she returns to Worcester."

"I am not going to be in it."

"How's that?"

He had always objected to be questioned, and he was disposed to be harsh and irritable at times now.

"Because I shall be a hundred miles away," he added sharply.

"On business?"

"Yes."

"I am glad you are beginning to work again," she said very meekly.

"Why?"

"You are always at your best when you are most busy."

He did not reply, though her soft answer surprised him not a little. It was only when he was in high spirits that he was full of acerbity; in his trouble she was a gentle woman enough. They were like the two figures in the child's weather-house, and only one could come into the light at a time.

They took Sarah Eastbell down-stairs, and there she said to Reuben,

"This is one step closer to Worcester, cousin."

"Yes," answered Reuben, "you and I will be marching side by side into St. Oswald's presently."

Which they never did.

When he had left for town, and for his instructions from the *Trumpet*, Sarah turned quickly to Lucy—

"He is better to-day. The old self is coming back that made him so dear a man."

"Don't say that," cried Lucy, "don't let a man know, at any time, that anyone thinks he's dear to anybody."

Sarah laughed at this inelegant summing up, and Lucy added sententiously, "It would spoil the best of men."

The next day Sarah was well enough to be of use a little, and she volunteered her services to John Jennings, who was still at work for the Saxe-Gotha. He had not done well with Mr. Splud, in whom he still had a certain amount of faith, despite the fallacy of many promises; but the public came on fine nights to see the fire-

works, and Mr. Splud doled out a sovereign now and then, and kept the pyrotechnist going—that is, going a little further down the hill each week.

Sarah found that she could manage “the lengths” better than John Jennings, and the long pipe-like strips which were filled with a thin vein of gunpowder, and were afterwards twisted into a variety of shapes, grew under her hands more rapidly than under Three-fingered Jack’s. John Jennings was struck with this rapidity, and pondered over it. An odd idea that had been in his head some days took action upon it also. He was an amazingly slow man as a rule, but he went off like one of his own rockets after Sarah had been assisting him for a week, and Reuben was back again, and oscillating in the old fashion between Camberwell and town. Sarah was stronger then; she had walked round the garden once that day before beginning work.

“You are very handy, Sarah,” John said, dreamily regarding her, and leaving off his work to observe hers more attentively; “it is aston-

ishing how quickly you have taken to the business."

"If I am of assistance, I am glad."

"What a comfort you would be to a man a week or two before November, when he doesn't know which way to turn!"

"Why November?"

"Guy Fawkes season."

"Oh!" said Sarah, "I shall be a long, long way from here before November."

John Jennings was about to say something very quickly in reply, but he paused and stared at her instead. Suddenly he got up, unlocked his cupboard, and refreshed himself with a small glass of whiskey behind the cupboard door, which he kept well between Sarah and the bottle. Lucy was upstairs setting Reuben's room to rights, and there was a fair field before him.

"You are not obliged to go away without you like," he said, as he came back and sat down.

"Oh, yes, I am."

"You are very handy," he said again, "and

I'm not so old as you fancy by a good many years, and you are quite a young woman. When you are well and strong, we might make a match of it, Sarah. Why not?"

"Good gracious!" said Sarah Eastbell.

It was her first offer, and she took it with a fair amount of philosophy, despite her weakness. She was more astonished than confused, although there was a flickering of colour for an instant on her cheeks.

"I don't want you to hurry over it," he continued confidentially, "or to tell Lucy anything about it yet, or even to drop a hint to your cousin Reuben."

"They are my two best friends."

"Yes, exactly, but till you have made up your mind, I wouldn't. It will save a deal of bother."

"But I have quite made up my mind never to marry, thank you, Mr. Fireworks."

"Mr. Jennings," he said, correcting her; " 'artist in fireworks,' which are very profitable things."

"I hope they are, for your sake," said Sarah,



anxious to soften her refusal as much as possible, "and that you will make your fortune by them presently. And if you will never talk like this again—for it is great nonsense, isn't it?—I will not speak of it to anyone."

"Thank you; it might be as well," said John, beginning his work again; "but it was on my mind, and I thought I would mention it."

"It was not worth mentioning to a poor bit of a thing like me, who has hardly got back to life."

"Wasn't it, though!" said Mr. Jennings, "I think it was. And you are not a poor bit of a thing, but growing a very fine young woman, by degrees."

"Oh, sir!—please don't."

"And you are very handy at the 'lengths,' and so pleasant and good-tempered over them, and Lucy seems to like you so much, and to be less disagree—to be so much happier, I mean," he added very quickly, "with you in the house."

"What a good woman she is!" added Sarah, striving hard for a divergence, feeling half disposed to laugh, and then to cry.

"Yes, awfully good, isn't she? She's hardly my style," he added, in his confidential tone again, "but some people would be very fond of her. She's brisk, you see."

"Yes," said Sarah, "and thoughtful, and industrious, and good."

"You said good before," replied John; "but she is not lively, she does not brighten up a place as you do."

"If you are going to say anything more about me, Mr. Jennings, I must find my way up-stairs. I'm very weak," she pleaded, "I can't bear to hear you talk in this way."

"I have done talking," said Jennings, "don't go. Lucy will be sure to ask what you have come up-stairs for, and worm all the truth out of you. I haven't offended you?"

"No, I am not offended."

"I haven't jumped at this in a hurry. Ever since you have been here, I have been thinking how forlorn you'll be when the old lady dies at Worcester—how lonely I shall be when Lucy marries and goes away."

"Is she likely to marry soon?"

"I sometimes fancy that your cousin Reuben and she understand each other."

"That must be wrong," replied Sarah decisively; "I don't think she likes Reuben much."

"You are a bad judge, Sarah. You didn't think I liked *you* much."

"Oh, you are not coming round again to that foolish subject!" cried Sarah.

"No—only to say that I do like you, and that weeks ago I sent up my shells and maroons from the Saxe-Gotha with only half the quantity of bang in them, lest they should be too noisy for you when you were lying ill here. Wasn't that love?"

"That was considerate, but——"

"Shop!"

"A customer!" cried John Jennings, very much astonished. "Bless my soul, so there is!"

John Jennings peered over the little wire blind that screened the back-parlour from vulgar gaze; and when he had regarded the customer sufficiently he went into the shop, and faced him behind the grimy counter.

"What can I have the pleasure of showing you, sir?" he said politely.

"Is this Hope Lodge?" was the query in reply.

"This is Hope Lodge, sir—Jennings's."

"Ah, I'm wrong," and the big man walked slowly and ponderously towards the door again.

"There is only one Hope Lodge in the street," John called after him. The broad pair of shoulders of the new-comer had blocked up the doorway in the act of exit, but there was a pause, and then the heavy face revolved once more in the direction of the pyrotechnist.

"Do you know any one in the street of the name of Culwick?" he asked gruffly.

"Reuben Culwick?" inquired John.

"Yes, that is the name."

"He lives here, sir."

"Then why the devil didn't you tell me so, instead of blinking your eyelids at me!" shouted the man, so fiercely that John Jennings backed against a gross of rocket-sticks, and brought them rattling to the floor.

"This is the first time you have mentioned the name. Is it anything from the *Trumpet*?"

"Trumpet—whose trumpet?"

"Ah, I see you don't know," said John, laughing a little; "it doesn't matter. Mr. Culwick is not at home."

"When will he be home?"

"I can't say, sir, really."

"You don't seem able to say anything sensibly," said the impolite stranger, "but I may take it that Reuben Culwick lives in this den?"

"You may take it, or leave it, for the matter of that, sir," said John, put out by the man's observation. "Den, indeed!" he muttered.

"Can't you keep a civil tongue in your head?" was the next question.

"Can't you?" was the rejoinder.

The white face took purplish hues of indignation, and a thick yellow stick, with a big gold knob at the top, like a door-handle, vibrated ominously in the hand of its owner. John Jennings stood a little further back from his side of the counter, and kept an eye on the irritable stranger.

"Do you know who I am?" the new-comer said pompously; "have you any idea whom you are addressing?"

"I haven't the slightest idea."

"I am Reuben Culwick's father."

"The deuce you are!" ejaculated John Jennings. "Oh, good gracious!—Lord help us! What a wonderful thing that you should come here! What will he say?—what will Lucy say?—what will he do?—Will you call again, sir?—will you walk in?—will you have a drop of *Trumpet*, and shall I send to the whiskey office for him, and tell him that you are waiting? Excuse me, Mr. Culwick, but I feel a little faint," and the pyrotechnist leaned against his back shelves, and clutched his forehead.

"You are not quite right in your head, young man," said Mr. Culwick, Senior, stolidly regarding him; "isn't there anyone more sensible on the premises, to whom I can entrust a message?"

"Oh, yes, sir, one or two," said John modestly; "will you please to do us the honour of stepping inside?"

He opened the parlour door, and Simon Culwick, of Sedge Hill, reflected for a moment, with his bushy eyebrows closing over his eyes. Then he followed Mr. Jennings into the parlour, where his grand-niece, whom he had never seen, was still working busily at the "lengths."

END OF THE FIRST VOLUME.

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